Coordinating Contemporary Asia in Art Exhibitions

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By the 1990s, a cartographic reimagining of an old cultural entity, Asia, had taken place in which Southeast Asia became a sub-division of an enlarged East Asia. Quite dissimilar politicians, for instance, took this position. In 1995, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad—Malaysia’s prime minister and a self-styled champion for the Global South—wrote, “We must commit ourselves to ensuring that the history of East Asia will be made in East Asia, for East Asia, and by East Asians”; and the nationalistic Ishihara Shintaro—soon to become governor of Tokyo—pronounced, “During the Cold War Japan was part of the western camp, an anomalous position wholly attributable to the polarized East-West confrontation over communism. Geographically and spiritually, Japan belongs to Asia.”1 Ishihara of course was aware of Japan's longstanding ambivalence at being part of a larger notion of a less-developed Asia and the historical legacy of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. The contemporary moment of a New Asia is, in Fredric Jameson’s term, a synchronic heterogeneity in which disparate economic development levels and temporalities (the inevitable need to confront the dyad of the “traditional” vs. “modern” in societies), along with culturally disjunctive entities and national histories, could be coordinated into a contemporary regional space.2 This is in defiance of modern social science’s binary logic of advanced and backward, rational and irrational/non-rational, with it being better to eliminate any lingering vestige of the past. The New Asian turn also offered novel possibilities for cultural expression. The focus here is on a selection of key representative exhibitions in the 1990s in which New Asia and its modern and contemporary art were curated into “being”: the 3rd Asian Art Show, Fukuoka (1989) and the 4th Asian Art Show, Fukuoka: Realism as an Attitude (1994); “Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions” (1996); and the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane, Australia (1996). The exhibitions in particular address the questions of tradition and cultural change in recent contemporary art. But while, expectedly, the legacy of colonialism persisted, the overall thrust was to set art in the everyday context of rapid modernization and urbanization—particularly in the wake of Cold War-era nation building and the emergence of the so-called East Asian Miracle economies of Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—and to examine the art enabled by the weakening of modernism and its preoccupation with the

2 Fredric Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” New Left Review 92 (March-April 2015): 119. The enlarged region is therefore part of a larger story of capitalist subsumption since the 1980s, “in which different dimensions—dimensions not only quantitatively distinct but qualitatively incommensurate . . . —are brought into relationship with each other, however fleetingly” (Jameson, ibid.).
formal characteristics of artwork and separation from daily life.

These exhibitions articulated flexible intimations of what can be called the global-regional in contemporary art and in which the exhibition itself is an inseparable part of new knowledge production. How should art from the region now be presented as contemporary if freed from the West/Rest binary, did not have to reject the presence of the traditional, and did not have to conform to paradigmatic painting and sculptural practices linked with a prominent, postwar “high modernism” that privileged abstract expressionism and proclaimed itself as universal. Temporality is a major concern here: the region’s increasing economic success meant that “we Asians” could now conceive of ourselves as sharing the coeval present with the advanced West—this was no longer the 1950s and 1960s that were saddled with American modernization theory and its teleology, within which Asia always lagged behind as the point that was stuck, since colonial times, behind the curve of the modern. Contemporaneity was now attained.

One major curatorial and theoretical response to the latest new in the region was an expanding sense of the modern elastic enough to retain “tradition” as part of a present-day life. Underlying this response, it could be said, is the rejection of conceptions of self-sufficient high culture that separated high and low, spiritual and material. The exhibitions appropriated and modified the early twentieth century’s historical avant-garde’s and postwar neo-avant-garde’s anti-art attacks on modernism’s autonomy aesthetic in the paradoxical appreciation of how installation art, performance art, and conceptualism that seemed able to draw in local materials and cultural traditions now should be recognized institutionally as part of the practice of a regional contemporary art.

Reconstituting National Culture and the Traditional

The acknowledged starting points for regional art exhibitions were the Asian Art Shows of the Fukuoka Art Museum from 1979/80. We witnessed incremental and persistent attempts to address tradition, with the backdrop of regional economic development and its multifarious socio-cultural impact gaining increasing relevance as that which affected both artistic content and form. Tradition and indigenous pluralism were found to have coordinates in the present’s everyday life.

Fukuoka’s inaugural show in 1979 begins with the issue of “the problem of tradition vis-à-vis [the] present age in Asian art,” and until the 3rd Asian Art Show, Fukuoka’s survey shows did not exceed being indefinite regional tracings of modernist and contemporary art. Curatorial investigations could not exist as the artwork was selected solely by various national art agencies, given a wish to affirm the embodiment of older cultural identities in recent art forms—not unexpected, given post-independence nation-building imperatives.\(^3\) The laissez-faire curatorial situation was compounded by the challenge to detecting any obvious pattern in the region’s artistic styles, given asynchronous

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\(^3\) The main reason, according to Soejima, for the exhibition procedure taken was a commitment to two resolutions. One was passed by a UNESCO organization, the International Association of Art, at their 1973 International Congress, “encouraging [the] protection of cultural identity possessed by each country;” and the other by the “Cultural Ministers’ Conference held also in 1973 in Jogjakarta, Indonesia, . . . [dedicated] to promoting international exchange . . . and vitalization of every cultural originality. It is needless to say that the 2nd Asian Art Show is the very embodiment and adoption of the spirit reflected in these resolutions” (Mikio Soejima, “Cultural Identities in Asian Art,” in Fukuoka Art Museum, 2nd Asian Art Show, Fukuoka, exhibition catalogue [Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1985], 9). The same framework applies to the original 1979/80 Asian Art Show. And so, as contended in chapter one, Fukuoka’s initial shows are “international-regional” exhibitions displaying the artwork of distinct entities that had to relate to each other across borders—borders that could be made less porous by Cold War era nationalisms.
art circumstances. Fukuoka’s then-acting director, Soejima Mikio, wrote in his 1985 Asian Art Show catalogue essay, “Cultural Traditions in Asian Art,” that artistic expression in Asia is literally in a conglomerative state of confusion with employment of all the different styles that appeared after the War, ranging from the Informel style of the fifties to the Conceptual Art in the seventies. Unlike the unified universalized situation of contemporary art in the West . . . its Asian equivalent indeed poses a chaotic picture.\(^4\)

How might curation be undertaken, then? The modernism of Art Informel co-existed alongside contemporary art’s Conceptualism. This condition is further complicated, he found, by exceptions in Northeast Asia—unlike Southeast and South Asia, generally speaking—that did not have reservations with either the modern or the traditional, and so were more in sync with the “universalized . . . West”: young Japanese artists were free from “old stagnant aesthetic values,” while Korean Dansaekhwa (monochromatic painting) used white as “their national traditional color” in minimalistic painting as responses to Western modes of abstraction.\(^5\) The 1985 impediment to reimagining Asia is Soejima’s endeavor to discover the “genuine essence of Asian art” [emphases mine].\(^6\) This oddly Orientalist search for a single and authentic cultural nucleus will weaken within a decade.

What assisted the pioneering reconstitution of tradition by the 4th Asian Art Show was the willingness to allow “what” tradition might be to change, given that artists interacted with different historical moments in varied ways. This freed tradition from, first, a fixed location within the progressive telos of modern Euro-American art—with tradition trapped in the past by the binary tradition/modernity framework of Oriental exoticism—and, second, from possible national-cultural abstractions developed after decolonization (or after European influence weakened, for societies not directly colonized), a thought to be developed more fully in “Traditions/Tensions.” Additionally, comparison or inter-Asian referencing may release tradition from within the arbitrary colonial borders that became the new national borders and allow more regional perspectives on shared cultural components. The 4th Asian Art Show made the case that contemporary art formats such as installation, performance art, and \textit{objets trouvés} assisted creativity by permitting artists to incorporate the local in a non-exotic way—aiding “interaction with everyday reality”—which was harder to do with modernist art’s formats and commitment to autonomy from the quotidian.\(^7\) The Fukuoka events before the 4th Show, it can be said, suffered from an inability to transcend a liberal-internationalist perspective on culture in which national-cultural heritage was both distinct but still should possess universal dimensions.

The early exhibitions also did not much benefit from any critical discursive component. Though the museum did organize symposia as part of their Asian Art Shows, they did not seem to be part of a larger strategy of knowledge production.\(^8\) Indeed, the way the title of the one-day symposium

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8 The meetings for the 3rd and the 4th Asian Art Shows, in contrast with the symposia for the inaugural and 2nd and Asian Art Shows, were preparatory practical conferences with official representatives from official art agencies from the participating countries held before the exhibitions.
held during “Festival: Contemporary Asian Art Show, 1980,” part two of their inaugural “Asian Artists Exhibition,” was phrased negatively as a question, suggesting handwringing rather than a serious search for the resolution of the question put forward: “What Must Be Done for the Future of Asian Tradition and Art Which Have Been Changed Under the Influence of Western Art?” Most (though not all) of the panelists were members of national art agencies, and so there must be some burden to represent the nation and national identity. The moderator, print artist and Western-style painter Masuda Yoshinobu (1905-90), summarized the overall discussion at the end of the symposium thus: “Asia has to create the Asian arts with the national consciousness or identity that requires closer cooperation.” However, there was no general anti-Western attitude in the symposium—mainly cautious stances on modern Western art’s impact on local identity and heritage.

But yet, there were intimations of how heritage and the present could be reconceived so that modern culture need not be perceived as a threat that were not picked up until the 3rd Show in 1989. For example, Raymundo Albano (1947-85), the Filipino artist-curator, whose own work ranged from abstract expressionism to installation and performance, firmly argued in his presentation that “borrowing” is a creative act, and not part of a (neo)colonized mental set:

> It is a fact that sometimes our colonial mentalities forget this [creativity] matter and we feel that borrowing is such a grievous, unrewarding or even traitorous but [yet] inevitable act. But the ’80s in the Philippine art will have to remove this bias and adopt new processes and materials from the [local] environment—even if it will entail a re-definition of art itself. In the end, paint on canvas may not be important for us. Installations as what you saw in the slides [I used] might be closer to our lives. [. . . A]nd what a more meaningful experience would it be if part of our preserving our tradition is the recognition that its scope of presence is world-wide.10

It is a prescient indication of how the exhibitionary imaginary will present tradition-in-the-contemporary by the mid-1990s. Setting aside colonial-era inhibitions and using vanguardist artforms such as installation art may not only outstrip modernist art formats such as paint, but offer a new art practice that both hews close to its locality—thus “preserving our tradition”—and may expand the comprehension of what—using a term not available in 1980—a comprehensive global art might be.

The 3rd Asian Art Show, unlike the first two editions, was given a theme: “Symbolic Visions in Contemporary Asian Life.” Soejima Mikio, now the confirmed director of the Fukuoka Art Museum, presented his curators’ brief in the catalogue essay, “In Pursuit of a Genuinely Asian World.” In keeping with a more centered exhibition modus operandi, the artwork selection process moved away from the liberal-internationalist model of representation: the Fukuoka Selection Committee would have a strong say for the final selection.11 Soejima wrote that the museum

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11  Six countries allowed the museum’s Selection Committee make the final decision—China, Nepal, the Philippines, Brunei, Korea, and Japan; eight made the final decision based on the Committee’s recommendations—Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and India; and Mongolia, as a fresh participating country, was allowed to make its own selection (Mikio Soejima, “In
had looked at Asian difference via “European models [of art] as universal standards,” resulting in a self-inflicted, Western Orientalist point-of-view on Asian cultural production; Japan instead should “look at Asia from inside as fellow Asians, and place more emphasis on the intrinsic and unique characteristics of each Asian country” (27). It should inter-reference art and culture from a vantage point inside the region. From that point of identification arose the theme: “we have positively recognized ‘tradition’ as something still living in ‘the modern age’ and continuing to stimulate us today”; and because of this, Soejima added, we will be able to understand how even varied “traditional elements” may function, and we can stop “abstractly discussing ‘tradition’ in contemporary Asian art” (28).

However, was there any commonality in this Asia with vastly differing “traditional elements”? Soejima argued that there was: a collective “‘Asian sensitivity,’ manifesting itself in Asian images” (27). This sensitivity was seen in the “symbolic visions” in contemporary Asian art that uses “iconographic symbols (such as Mandala or Tantric symbols) which can be traced back to ‘tradition,’” but yet do not repeat “dead iconography,” alternatively manifesting “symbolic visions in everyday life” which have been revived today after having gone through the ordeals of modernization” (28). Symbolic visions are repurposed symbols—and therefore not a simplistic “uncritical repetition of dead iconography” (28)—that tell us something about present-day social or economic tribulations. The 3rd Asian Art Show reconstituted tradition, relocating it into the quotidian realm where history was made. However, one further question was brought up—and that tripped up the enterprise: “we Asians have a mental structure which lets us find gods, or the marvels of nature or a unique view of the cosmos in the environment of our everyday life” (28). And with that pronouncement on a unique, pan-Asian “mental structure,” unfortunately, We Asians reenter the zone of the clichéd authentic Asian cultural nucleus, which was also an ahistorical zone that was out of “everyday life.”

Soejima’s view was that while Japan shared common artistic bases with the metropolitan West in relation to modern and contemporary art, the “social role and position of art in Asia differ widely . . . [and so, for now,] we may have no other alternatives [sic] than to define ‘contemporary Asian art’ to be art produced by contemporary Asians” (29). This, unfortunately, was a tautology, not a definition—it was an excuse, as is the “mental structure” position, for a lack of a firm opinion on contemporary Asian art. The 4th Asian Art Show will revisit the matters of tradition-in-the-contemporary and examine how disparity can be coordinated into a contemporary Asian art in the context of rapid economic development.

One of Soejima’s curators, Kuroda Raiji, wrote a catalogue essay on the exhibition’s Japanese selection that, unintentionally, adumbrated on how Japan connected with the region via an economic reality, “Symbols Transgressing the Border.” He began by bluntly asserting that “in contemporary Japanese art, [there are] few works, if any, in which ‘tradition’ is deliberately represented [to] deserve positive appraisal.” Indeed, Japan, being proud of its economic success

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12 Kuroda is presently director of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum.
and having accepted things Western, may have less need either for solidarity with Asia and “has now begun to consume Asia, both materially and spiritually, form [sic] the standpoint the West once took. The ‘ethnic (Asian in this context) taste’ which is now conspicuous in the preference of the Japanese . . . [has been] accelerated by the strong yen.”14 But, in turn, he was aware that Japan was also consumed by the West in a similar way, as wealth can confer the pleasurable consumption of cultural Otherness.

For Kuroda, the dichotomies or dualisms such consumption was predicated upon—East vs. West; spiritual vs. material culture—were false, given that Japan was committed to modern material culture, as were Asian nations. One cogent aim of exhibition, therefore, “should [be to] reveal to one another the realities of culture and life which ‘the modern age’ of each [country] is producing, and this should be done without [any] idealization or mystification [of cultural purity].”15 We must avoid both the exoticized consumption of tradition in Asia and representing our cultures as completely unique, as such cultural constructions follow only from accepting the modern/traditional dyad as foundational reality. This was an insight realized better in the 4th Show. But what might now be reconsidered was why the consumption of Asia did not mean that Japan had less of a part in the larger East Asian sphere. This capacity to consume had been facilitated by the 1985 Plaza Accord, when the Japanese yen substantially appreciated against the U.S. dollar.16 The revalued yen led not only to Japanese tourism in the larger region “to consume Asia, both materially and spiritually,” but also to the offshoring of Japanese industrial facilities, with Southeast Asia as a key recipient zone, increasing regional economic integration. The mid-1980s saw the “repositioning [of] the country within [a larger] East Asia after so many years ‘outside’ the region under the cozy embrace of an American patron.”17 Intentionally or otherwise, both the Asian Art Shows and Kuroda’s charge against Japan’s material-spiritual consumption of Asia were part of what has been called Japan’s 1980s return to Asia.18

The 1994 4th Asian Art Show was the breakthrough. The theme this time was “Realism as an Attitude.” The selection process, though, was more strict than for 3rd Show: the participating countries now made their selections based on the theme, but Fukuoka curators also nominated artists (with the national agencies’ permission), with final decisions made by Fukuoka’s Selection

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14 Kuroda, “Symbols Transgressing,” 270-71. Of course, the ongoing commitment to the Asian Art Shows demonstrate that the Fukuoka Art Museum and the city of Fukuoka maintain some solidarity with Asia.


16 The 1985 Plaza Accord among the G-5 nations—France, Germany, the U.S., Britain, and Japan—was inked so as to manipulate exchange rates via the depreciation of the U.S. dollar relative to the Japanese yen and the Deutsche mark to correct American trade imbalances with the two countries.

17 Simon Avenell, “What Is Asia for Us and Can We Be Asians? The New Asianism in Contemporary Japan,” Modern Asian Studies 48, no. 6 (2014): 1,596. It is arguable that the Asian Art Shows operate broadly within what Avenell describes as a Japan in Asia trajectory, in which, as the political scientist Takashi Shiraishi says, the aims “should be ‘to harmonize internationalism and Asianism,’ and to create ‘a stable Asian regional order,’ along with ‘expanding and deepening exchange’ through ‘economic cooperation, cultural cooperation, intellectual cooperation [and] technological cooperation’” (quoted in Avenell, “What is Asia for Us”: 1,629). For an early assessment of Japan’s reentry into Southeast Asia, see Peter Duus, “The ‘New Asianism,’” in Can Japan Globalize? Studies on Japan’s Changing Political Economy and the Process of Globalization in Honour of Sung-Jo Park, ed. Arne Holzhausen (Heidelberg: Physica-Verlag, 2001).

The exhibition’s dense framing essay was by Ushiroshōji Masahiro, a pioneer Japanese curator for Southeast Asian art.20 “Realism as an Attitude: Asian Art in the Nineties” delineated how the art featured in the 4th Show can be defined as contemporary Asian art because new artistic form and content emerged in relation with definitive regional and not only global events in the 1980s—crucial as “global” is often a euphemism for Euro-America.

To begin with, Ushiroshōji used “realism” in a restricted manner:

Since the end of the late 1980s, a common outlook has been widely noticed in Asian art: namely an extremely realistic attitude. For instance, some works are based on an awareness of social problems . . . [such as] the suppression of human rights by a political or social system. The advent of urbanization, industrialization, and a consumer society in the wake of economic development is changing people’s lifestyles, while traditional values that form the basis of village communities are being lost. [. . .] Another group of works focuses on everyday events that are close to the artist. [. . . T]his group of works probes the changing face of society through changes in everyday reality.21

Realism did not refer to illusionistic realism in visual art, but to the artist’s stance toward the “everyday reality” of political-economic events that may destabilize societies. Those two components in the adjective seemed inseparable in Ushiroshōji’s essay. He began with the Berlin wall going down in 1989, but then directly proceeded to the region:

In Asia, several political systems have changed and the democracy movement has led to bloody incidents. Even countries that rigidly cling to socialism have actively pushed economic reforms and liberalization. The member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have followed on the heels of the “four dragons”—South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore which achieved dazzling economic growth in the 1980s. In the 1990s the economy of China is booming. (33)

The indirect reference to the massacre during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests as one of the “bloody incidents” would have been inescapable in 1994, and this was followed by China’s increased prosperity thereafter. Political transitions or, more accurately, socialist not-quite-transitions yoked with capitalist transformations, rapid urbanization and industrialization in essentially agricultural societies, Ushiroshōji remarked, “seemed to have confused and distorted people’s minds” (33). But all the above is still context and does not quite explain how the new artistic “realism” arrives.

Ushiroshōji contended that the 4th Asian Art Show takes place “in the aftermath of modernism,”

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19 Soejima Mikio, “Selection Process of Artists and Artworks,” in Fukuoka Art Museum, 4th Asian Art Show, Fukuoka: Realism as an Attitude, exhibition catalogue (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1994), 32. Similar to the 3rd Show, art was featured from Northeast Asia (China, Mongolia, South Korea, Japan), Southeast Asia (Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam), and South Asia (Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh). The 3rd Asian Art Show catalogue had pictures of the artwork arranged by country while the 4th Show significantly arranged the artwork illustrations by the themes.

20 Ushiroshōji joined the Fukuoka Art Museum as a curator in 1987 and moved to the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum—the recipient museum of the Fukuoka Art Museum’s Asian collection—when it started in 1999. He has been Professor in the Faculty of Humanities at Kyushu University since 2002.

21 Ushiroshōji Masahiro, “Realism as an Attitude: Asian Art in the Nineties,” in Fukuoka Art Museum, 4th Asian Art Show, Fukuoka: Realism as an Attitude, exhibition catalogue (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1994), 34. All page numbers from Ushiroshōji’s essay hereafter will be given within brackets in the main text.
beyond dilemma-stricken "basic framework of modern Asian art" (35) for two reasons. The first was artists had access to new formats and media such as "installations and performances, and there is a noticeable increase in the use of personal everyday objects" for "undertaking a new subject such as one about society demanded the use of a new of representation" (35). The 3rd Show had showcased some anti-formalist tendencies and the 4th Show picked up from there. The second is that "[t]he term ‘Asia’ . . . encompasses different social circumstances resulting from different economic conditions and political systems” (35); and so, depending on how open or closed countries are to the latest imperatives to develop economically, both artistic content and form will morph. This did not mean that the traditional disappeared, but that freed from the constraints of modernist formats and the burden of being “national,” artworks now conveyed more individual messages freely using local resources: “Using as a base the traditional forms used in Wayang, Java’s shadow [puppet] theatre, Dadang Christanto (Indonesia) wryly protests against mass murder” (35). Ushiroshōji effected a definition of contemporary Asian art in which the late 1980s becomes a moment of rupture with the postwar legacy of modernism, in which the postcolonial/post-independence demands to be “national” were weakened, and when vanguard art practices can be used in conjunction with local cultural resources and heritage. Reiko Tomii remarks that: “In English, ‘contemporary art’ . . . [eventually] shed its genuine meaning of ‘today’s art’ to become a critically loaded concept; it followed ‘postmodern art’ of the 1980s and 1990s before it came into frequent use in the 21st century and began to invoke the discourse of ‘the contemporary’ and ‘contemporaneity.’”22 In comparison, Ushiroshōji’s “contemporary Asian art” marks a moment in the mid-1990s when it becomes more conceivable to invoke cultural heterogeneity so as to position it in horizontal conjunction with the contemporary and contemporaneity. The 4th Asian Art Show’s central reconstitution of tradition-from-yesterday into tradition-in-the-contemporary is a work-in-progress and continued into “Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions” and the 2nd APT.

Coordinating Tradition-in-the-Contemporary

In an essay for the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary art catalogue, curator Julie Ewington credited the 4th Asian Art Show with removing “the lingering sense that the archetypal experiments in modern art belong to the canonical figures in the West.”23 By registering that Asian artists effected genuine artistic innovation, Fukuoka curators struck a theoretical stance: “‘Realism as an Attitude’ was a bold attempt to outfox the exhausted dichotomies: East/West, past/present, timelessness/history, in favour of a focus on what [literary-cultural critic] Homi Bhaba calls ‘the enunciative present.’”24 We move away from fixed cultural identification to the performative coordination of heterogeneity into a present-day Asia. The insight on “exhausted dichotomies” comes into plain sight in two high-profile 1996 exhibitions—the Asia Society’s “Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions” and the Queensland Art Gallery’s (QAG) 2nd APT.

24 Ewington, ibid. Discussion of “the enunciative present” occur in Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994). A number of the curators discussed in this chapter also draw upon Bhabha for their understanding of cultural hybridity to think through the postmodern and cultural diversity in visual art.
“Traditions/Tensions” featured artwork from Indonesia, Thailand, India, Philippines, and South Korea and radicalized the exotic-traditional in ways that contested hierarchical or state-driven national(istic) usage of tradition. While the exhibition organized by the Asia Society in New York City was in the first instance for an American audience, aiming “to give [a] sense of dazzling quality and diversity [and] to get them away from some [limitations of] ‘Asianness,’” the then director of the Society’s Galleries Vishaka N. Desai says, the guest curator selected was Thai curator and artist Apinan Poshyananda, whose star in the 1990s was ascendent. Apinan noted that a roundtable in New York in 1992 of critics, scholars, and curators that “helped to form the core and the rationale of the exhibition” agreed “that instead of American curators with particular conceptions to select art and artists from Asia, an Asian guest curator would be responsible for working with advisers from the five Asian countries represented in the show.” That is, both an Asian curator and less “particular conceptions” of a varied contemporary exotic-traditional Asian art were to be displayed. Korean art in “Traditions/Tensions,” though, offered an unintended tension in which the national commitment to modernization and then globalization, in contrast with the other works presented, rendered tradition into a lingering memory of socioeconomic change.

The 2nd APT had a wider art selection than “Traditions/Tensions,” grouped in loose geographical clusters of East Asia and South and Southeast Asia, but it is harder to pin down its thematic foci because of the Gallery’s preference for “integrating concepts” rather than themes—“Tradition and Change” for the first Triennial iteration and “Present Encounters” for the second. The inclusive concepts went hand-in-glove with a costly co-curatorship model for the Triennial’s first three editions, incorporating participation by regional curators, artists, and advisors, with more opinions coming in via the largest international art conference ever convened in Australia, making the Triennial a considerable discursive event in thinking Asia. The 2nd APT had 15 teams comprising 42 Australian and foreign curators and featured Apinan as the curatorial coordinator for Australian art. The curatorial decisions, artist-critic Pat Höffle explains, served “to offer an understanding of the contemporary in a way . . . that sought for a gradual, slow, collaborative and consultative understanding that made way for [productive] disagreements and ‘failed dialectics.’” This means that we are left to reflect upon sometimes disjunctive images of the region on display—but, as curator Caroline Turner set it out, “There is no sense of a homogenous regional identity yet there are common themes which emerge. [. . .] Perhaps the most significant factor that does emerge

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25 Author’s interview with Vishaka N. Desai, March 1, 2015.
26 Author’s interview with Desai; and Apinan quoted in Timothy Morrell, “Cultural Crossfire: The Curatorial Travels of Apinan Poshyananda,” Art Asia-Pacific 3, no. 4 (1996), 44. Among those present at the 1992 roundtable were well-known American critics and curators, including Robert Storr and Alexandra Munroe. Others present from Asia, Australia, Canada, and Britain were Gao Minglu, T. K. Sabapathy, Jim Supangkat, Kuroda Raiji, Gulammohammed Sheikh, John Clark, and David Elliot. Desai observes that “the first 1992 meeting [was] to make American colleagues aware of what they did not know” (author’s interview with Vishaka N. Desai, March 1, 2015).
27 The appointment of Apinan for the Australian artwork also helped ward off criticisms of cultural imperialism but drew other criticism: “Poshyananda’s choices trivialise Australia’s presence. It is odd that with $1 million or more of public money to promote their art, the organisers shrink from giving us a stronger profile” (Nick Jose, “Over the Borders,” Australian Review of Books, November 1996, 18).
from the region is a sense of dynamic change.”

Unsurprisingly, the QAG’s curatorial approach was criticized—Ushiroshōji Masahiro wrote that the Second APT “lacked coherence.” The other view was that “the real and actual engagement of the region according to many different terms of reference.” The latitude allowed made the 2nd APT an expanded display of the unintended tension I have mentioned in “Traditions/Tensions” in which arguments appeared, on one hand, for the exotic-traditional to be reconceived as the contemporary desire for traditions and, on the other hand, for the de facto commandeering of the global—resignified so that it is no longer a covert sign of Western cultural hegemony—in which a metropolitanizing of Asian art, in critic Geeta Kapur’s words, forsook the “delight . . . of plenitude via tradition.”

Caroline Turner, then deputy director of the QAG, told the conference during the opening weekend that the 2nd Triennial was focused “on the issues of the present” given what had already been learned, namely “that there is no immutable sameness about Asia-Pacific art” and “that definitions of traditional and contemporary art need review.” Both exhibitions ran almost simultaneously, with the Triennial opening on September 22nd and “Traditions/Tensions” on October 4th, 1996. Despite the differences in scale between the two events, their curatorial experimentation with newer knowledge frameworks resulted in the flexible coordination of some contrasting views on the contemporary into an inclusive present.

In the “Preface” to the catalogue, Apinan set up the context for “Traditions/Tensions.” The millennium’s end saw “the whirlwinds of political, economic, and cultural change” in East Asia, with one result being that “decentered megacities in distant corners of the globe” are now unwilling to be “disconnected zones of silence.” The demand for artistic-cultural representation in the wake of economic globalization becomes de rigueur for exhibitions after Fukuoka’s 4th Asian Art Show. The five countries in the exhibition, though, offer only indicative understandings of “long Asian traditions which are now experiencing stages of intense transition,” given that “in contemporary Asia, tradition extends across such vast heterogeneities and cultural differences.” In the catalogue’s introduction, “Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition,” Apinan contended that the post-Cold War New World Order should have offered an “an unprecedented free play of pluralism and heterogeneity” of the burgeoning visual art of New Asia, but this was not the case.

difficulty is that of tensions within Asian societies and what postcolonial states do to sustain authoritative control: “Cultural diversity and national identity tend to arouse fictive versions of art and culture enclosed within homogeneous wholes of exotic, tranquil, [and] timeless Asia.”

Supposedly postcolonial national states are quite capable of deploying essentialized identities to support internal colonization. This concern took up the central space in “Traditions/Tensions.”

The exhibition displayed contemporary artists whose work “include fragments of tradition that serve to question nationalistic aesthetics and bigotry.” One representative example for Apinan is the Indian artist N. N. Rimzon’s installation sculpture, *The Inner Voice* (1992), which featured a contemplative standing nude made of resin fiberglass, derived from a Jain deity, surrounded by cast-iron swords arranged in a semi-circle, with the swords’ sharp ends facing the nude—a symbol of nonviolence under threat. The installation was Rimzon’s comment on the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 by Hindu activists. Apinan’s own catalogue chapter, “Contemporary Thai Art: Nationalism and Sexuality à la Thai,” excoriated what he called “neotraditional Thai art”—“a consensus art, [possessing] nonthreatening styles of art used to illustrate subject matters that revere Buddhism and Thai consciousness” that supported “the spectacular promotion of Nation, Religion, and Monarchy—the three pillars of nation-state ideology.”

A burgeoning business climate actually encouraged neotraditional display via commissioned murals in hotels and corporate headquarters. Confronted by Thai-centric art, Apinan expounded, “radical Thai artists” have resorted to contemporary art formats such as conceptualism and installation, “though they have drawn inspiration for their site-specific installations from local rituals, practices, and spaces, . . . [and used i]ndigenous materials . . . [in] pursuing the theme of Thainess in transition. . . . Installation art . . . is now central to this [identity] project because it signifies both Thainess and internationalism.”

Installation was not a Western influence that impaired Thai identity but allowed a rethink of indigenous identity in transition and within more globalized socioeconomic circumstances.

Catalogue essays by Geeta Kapur from India, Marian Pastor Roces from the Philippines, and Jim Supangkat from Indonesia promoted inter-Asian referencing for readers in which shared histories of European colonialism were not seen to fundamentally constrain contemporary cultural formations. Kapur’s and Pastor Roces’ essays are the most cogent and I will concentrate on them. Kapur’s “Dismantling the Norm” examines “nationalist cultural discourse” and the artists valorized by that discourse: “Until recently, the identity of the Indian artist was [male,] modern and secular.”

While qualifying that “the norm of an integrated Indian identity was honorable, . . . what [now] most needs unmasking is the civilizational profile that cultural practitioners in India, artists among

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25. The title of the chapter is a play on expressions current in the 1990s—“Four Little Dragons” and “Four Asian Tigers”—that referred to the Newly Industrialized Countries of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea, and is not a reference to Ang Lee’s film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which was made in 2000.


38 Apinan, “Roaring Tigers,” 29.


40 Apinan, “Contemporary Thai Art,” 107, 108.

them, have hitherto adopted,” a profile within which the sectarian (tribals, Dalits, women), the religious, and popular visual culture are suppressed via the primitivist trope where “traditional” cultural praxis is placed. However, she also contended that a celebration of the eclectic and the hybrid cannot be the replacement for the monolith, for a “space for [present-day] contradictions has to be opened within the national/modern paradigm so that there is a real (battle) ground for cultural difference” and “postmodern notions of hybridity” will not create that ground—and written even though hybridity is deployed by Desai and Apinan in the catalogue. Postmodernism’s ahistoricism blunts the diachronic reality of marginalized cultures and did not aid the dialectical synthesis that Kapur’s cultural Marxism requires. An Asian avant-garde and contemporary art will “open out the sacred and the self-incorporating secret with which objects in the world and in art are imbued . . . [and] recode them for present cultural purposes.” It is arguable that the power of the installation work seen in “Traditions/Tensions,” as Kapur piercingly argued, arose from “a relationship to materials and skills that is quite different from that known in the West. We must remember that, in Asia, the material is still connected with artisanal practice, with handcraft. The artists have skills; there are artisans in transitional stages within a village and urban market economy who have traditional skills.”

This judgement applied in approximate ways to work in the exhibition from India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, but less-well to South Korea—I will return to this later. She hoped that such renditions of the avant-garde will challenge hegemonic Euro-American versions, given that Asia “also promises to be [Euro-America’s] economic rival and ultimate nemesis!” Kapur established in direct horizontal conjunction the exotic-traditional, the contemporary avant-garde, and economic New Asia.

Marian Pastor Roces’s “Bodies of Fiction, Bodies of Desire” was aligned with Kapur’s position. She was critical of tendencies to “reduce peasants, nomads, tribal (sic) people, and the poor—in other words, the majority of the Philippine people—to the [heroic] ‘folk’” and use ahistorical ideas of traditional art to insist that responsible contemporary artists must “imbue traditional art with life, . . .[and] greater resplendence” rather than allow “intermixing” of format and content in contemporary art practice. Tradition always coped with the tension of intermixing, or otherwise, she posited, “it would not be a tradition, a structure of continuity, distinctively configured but never in isolation.” The undertaking instead should be to make contemporary art an effective fiction-making technology that challenged the other fictions one might think suspicious: “For fiction—liberating, repressive, questioning, mourning—is the only potential for contemporary art making, which can claim neither the quintessentially Other not the utterly universal.”

44 Kapur, “Dismantling,” 64.
46 Kapur, “Dismantling,” 68.
48 Pastor Roces, “Bodies of Fiction,” 90.
49 Pastor Roces, “Bodies of Fiction,” 90. She acerbically remarks that while “white colonial reveries” are a problem, more alarming is that “such [white] fantasies, now bodies of desire to Filipinos, are reified as
Apinan had spoken of “fictive versions of [national] art” but Pastor Roces here makes positive the potentiality of fictionality.

All three writers recuperated the exotic-traditional from a position embedded in the past in their versions of an Asian contemporary avant-garde. Jim Supangkat’s essay, “Multiculturalism/ Multimodernism,” was in broad accord with them by arguing that the transition to the contemporary came from Indonesian artists’ use of marginalized local materials, rebuffing their status as “low art” in the artistic signification of present-day Indonesia. However, the general orientation of the radicalized exotic-traditional against nationalistic tradition did not apply to the South Korean essay by curator and art historian Jae-Ryung Roe, “Encountering the World: The Past and the Present.” Her argument was that the Korean artists selected for “Traditions/Tensions” had artwork shaped by “the consequences of the nation’s past—the history of modernity, the burden of assimilating and catching up [in terms of modernization], the lingering memories of tradition, and the tensions created in the process of change.”50 The signal difference lay in the lingering memories of tradition after feeling to have “caught up” with the advanced West (and presumably Japan, the erstwhile colonial power) in (secure) economic and (slightly less insecure) artistic terms.

To begin with, the reception of Western art had been one of a “paradoxical unity of ambiguity and anguish” and not simply anguish per se.51 Western art came about in the eighteenth century and became more prominent under the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945). While a division between suhyang hwa (Western painting) and dong’yang hwa (Oriental or traditional ink painting) subsequently developed, the discomfort with modern painting was “also [because] it was brought to Korea by the [more modern] colonizer.”52 By the 1970s, there was a more comfortable assimilation of modernism through a monochromatic and minimalist painting linked to “spirituality in East Asian art and distinctively Korean aesthetics,” though the 1980s Minjoong art (or people’s art) movement still saw this as Western mimicry.53 However, the real game changer was the 1994 national policy on globalization, or segehwa: for a ruptured art community, “the discourse about becoming globally competitive and about gaining international recognition for Korean contemporary art is the one unifying element on the [artistic] agenda.”54 In this version of Asia, there was not much tension between a national contemporary art and any idea of the exotic-traditional.

The unintended tension between tradition-in-the-contemporary and a post-exotic modern in South Korea loomed into broader relief in the exhibitionary and discursive contours of the 2nd APT. In the “Present Encounters” conference that accompanied the Triennial, Korean curator Soyeon Ahn—who was involved with selecting the APT’s Korean artists—echoed elements of Roe’s argument: “from the end to the 1950s, Korean art has kept pace with world art movements through the various practices and reflections of art and its own identity during the last forty years. [. . .] Moreover, . . . Koreans have become aware of the importance of global exchanges and

[are] proud of our potential to make a contribution to global culture.” The Korean weakening of the dichotomies of East/West and past/present proceeded from an incremental relationship with international contemporaneity that came to a head in 1994 caused its own tensions as the national reflected upon its relation to global art and culture: “when we emphasise only our own national or regional identity, I think our art will decline and be seen as exotic or folk art, which satisfies the Western taste for anthropological appropriation.” There is thus no need to rehabilitate the exotic-traditional. Alison Carroll in the 2nd APT catalogue opined, “There are a number of uncomfortable zones in the visual arts world in Asia which are infrequently explored: the discomfort in Asian allegiances between the industrialised countries of North[east] Asia—Japan, Korea, Taiwan—and the rest.” Korea’s particular presence within “Traditions/Tensions” and now the Triennial demonstrated how globalizing Asia was both the context for and tense subject matter in the ongoing imagining of Asia.

Modernization and cultural change in urbanized Asian centers was a topic that Apinan had brought up but did not actively pursue in “Traditions/Tensions.” This topic in the Triennial’s catalogue appeared not only as it applied to Korea but, unsurprisingly, to Japan, given its long modernizing history. Curator Fumio Nanjo wrote in “The Present Situation of Japanese Art” about fundamental Japanese cultural transformations and this issue applied to some other regional locales. Computers and electronics gave rise to futuristic images of society, even as “customs, habits, ways of living and systems handed down . . . are still functioning”: “These new cultural and social conditions are emerging conspicuously today in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia, but Japan was the pioneer in taking this direction. Following World War II, Japan was forced to abandon a large part of its heritage because of defeat in war, and it also [chose] to give up many of its traditional values” to foster an advanced economy. Nanjo did not make a distinction between Northeast and Southeast Asia as Alison Carroll did, given his understanding of a shared desire for development in the larger region. The newer Japanese art from the second half of the 1980s, as Nanjo outlined it, engaged with what might be described as both indigenized and indigenous metropolitan elements: “comic books, consumer society pervasive commercial and cultural signs, multiculturalism, Japanese taste, body theory, urban theory, and technology.” Some art did adopt what Nanjo calls japonisme, and one example was the work of Nakahashi Katsushige (b. 1955), who has used images of Sumo wrestlers as a traditional symbol; revealingly, he added that such contemporary work appeared exotic to the Japanese young.

If post-exotic socio-cultural transformation came into unimpeded view in the 2nd APT, what also occurred was that Geeta Kapur’s tradition-in-the-contemporary standpoint was radicalized beyond what we saw in “Traditions/Tensions” in another incisive essay, “Two or Three Things About Ourselves.” She arrived in Australia after the United States and the struggle (said only


semi-jocularly) to speak of Asian art to Americans, and pronounced that the APT’s sympathy to Asia’s contemporary cultures afforded “an occasion to chart a [conceptual] topography that is geographical, civilisational, and [that] draws out the Asian Now.” Kapur did not intend a weak, ahistorical pan-Asian commonality, but asserted that an active predilection still existed for the classical traditions—India’s hinterland held living artisanal and vernacular traditions that the modern artist should get to know, decipher, and reinterpret for the present. She did not suggest that unmediated cultural history is just “there” for the taking but that an Asia Now need not be metropolitan in its outlook, whether Western or Asian, which we could say seemed the assumption in Nanjo’s essay. Kapur provocatively queried, “It is worth asking why the civilisational frame [for contemporary art] should have to shrink to the size of the global metropolis—is that the only recognized site for art today? It is also necessary to develop, within the framed *mise en scène* of the past, stylistics of being that suits the historically conscious contemporary.” We need not recode artisanal materials only for indigenous Asian avant-gardes, as she argued in “Traditions/Tensions,” but think about the fundamental “existential continuity in the creative act itself” if the modern artist lives in a country that possesses “a culturally rich and materially pauperised hinterland”: might the artist not consider practicing an art offering “a generosity which can encompass and contain the loss of ‘superseded’ culture?” Kapur’s views perhaps had been modified after the May 1996 Indian general election, as she believed the “electorate has voted with such cunning” that the long-ruling Indian National Congress was thrown off its roost, “forcing an encounter between the right-wing Hindu nationalist party[,] the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP),] with a broad alliance of secular forces. With regional Dalit and minority aspirations riding high, a new federalism is on the cards in which the communist parties [in India], by modifying their rigid forms of sectarianism, can play a key role.” How such equivalent possibilities existed for other societies in this version of contemporary Asia occupied Kapur’s mind as the hope for the regional.

Kapur’s civilizational and aesthetic framework made her own previous argument for distinctive and non-Eurocentric avant-garde emergences that came out of the dialectical tradition look like privileged advancements ignoring economically uneven societies. And, certainly, it was observed by the novelist Nicholas Jose of the Triennial, “There is a correlation between the size of a country’s economic clout and the acceptance of its contemporary art.” It is curator David Elliott who, in “A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush,” picked up on the value of reworked thinking on the avant-garde. The radical art that arose in Europe and Russia in the 19th and early 20th centuries gained “ironical overtones” after “reductivism, conceptualism and dematerialisation” became part of the advanced, neo-avant-gardist art of the 1970s, as this politically charged art was “superseded by the anything goes, free market aesthetics of the 1980s, in which a vacuous historicism and eclecticism replaced the positivistic progressions of earlier decades.” Eventually, issues of representation came

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60 Kapur, “Two or Three Things,” 22.
61 Kapur, “Two or Three Things,” 23.
63 Kapur, “Two or Three Things,” 23, 34. This expectation that subaltern representation by marginalized groups could come more to the foreground of politics grinds to a halt when on October 13, 1999, the Hindu fundamentalist BJP’s Atal Bihari Vajpayee took the oath of office as India’s prime minister.
64 Jose, “Over the Borders,” 16.
forward, replacing an older, class-based politics. While not dismissing the new cultural politics, what Elliott had in mind in contrast to such politics was artwork in Asia that appeared, for example, in the “China/Avant-Garde Exhibition” held in Beijing in February 1989, which displayed “artists who had tried to exorcise the ghosts of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, not only by re-establishing the idea of artistic autonomy but also by envisioning and agitating for new forms of democratic government.” His contention was that it is in China, Indonesia, Taiwan, and “to some extent” also in Singapore and South Korea, that “the mix of economic development, artistic discourse, modernity and political power was radically different from that of the West, [and] that the concept of an avant-garde seemed valid.” The fractured conceptual topographies of Asia that Kapur and Elliott presented acknowledged the heterogeneous impact of rapid economic development on the infrastructure of societies, an impact that lead to differing yet coordinated understandings of radicalized artistic possibilities in the 2nd APT.

To conclude, we may return to the question of temporality. If modernity was the temporal mode of colonial-era capitalism and continued to be so during the post-Second World War decolonization that took place within the context of the Cold War and the dominance of modernization theory, giving a differential temporality of the new within which semiperipheral Asia was behind the curve of History, then contemporaneity is the temporal structure of rapid regional development which articulates (at least the fiction of) a global unity. Despite the historical complications of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and the recognition of Asia as a colonial-era construct, the term is revamped into a productive differential concept in which Asia does not need to be One but still can pragmatically and performatively connect plural locales.

The contemporary, then, is simultaneously a critical (or postcolonial) modernity that embraces notions of multiculturalism for “rethinking” Asia and a fractured modernity that does not quite manage to be “a break from modern history,” as the art historian Patrick Flores suggests. The “other” voices of cultural elites and producers struggle toward defining what “our” historic artistic modernism was and what “our” contemporary is or could be, if not viewed only as Westernized cultural imitations. This is a reflexivity posed as a modernity facilitated by the contradictory cultural valences contained in capitalist entrenchment in the semiperiphery. Asia as a conceptual site became ready for reinscription by the 1990s by curators and regional art institutions.

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68 Patrick Flores, personal e-mail communication to the author, April 21, 2007.