

ASIALINK ARTS

Through the looking glass

THE ASIALINK ARTS PROGRAM 1990–2010

Alison Carroll



Alison Carroll was founding Director of the Asialink Arts Program 1991–2010.
This history was written at the end of her tenure in late 2010.

Published 2012 by Asialink
The University of Melbourne Parkville
Victoria Australia 3010

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You could never have told me what it would be like.

— Australian curator Malaysia 1993

It was the hardest and the best thing I have ever done.

— Australian artist-in-residence China 1996

These two comments have resonated in the Asialink Arts program from the early days. They are about the crucial role of personal experience in a different culture, and how creative people respond to this. Difference and challenge arouse curiosity and require courage. Opening up opportunities for Australian creative people in Asia and supporting their experience has been the most important role of the arts program at Asialink over the period of this essay: 1990–2010.

The arts have a paradoxical role in Australia's relationship with Asia. Central to our wellbeing and how we see ourselves, more easily able than any other form of endeavor to cross cultural boundaries, led by individuals of curiosity and courage, the arts have, however, frequently taken a back seat to business and politics in the minds of people who care about the relationship. For many Australians the arts of Asia are intimidating, inscrutable and 'difficult'. At Asialink we realized the easiest path to increase knowledge of Asian culture and encourage direct experience was through the contemporary world: the arts of today.

Australian artists responded with enthusiasm. Through Asialink's program of this first twenty years lies the experience of some 600 artists-in-residence and innumerable additional artists, curators, performers, writers, and other practitioners who have committed to working in Asia. They are a golden resource for our future.

Asia is hard. The impetus for the Asialink Arts program was taking advantage of Australia's geographic closeness to Asia and overcoming decades of indifference based on long-outmoded ideas of 'where' was important for us in the world. The work was then trying to make access available to the variety and richness of the contemporary cultures of Asia. This meant setting up links which artists and others could use and then saying to them: 'over to you; now go for it'.

Reading back over early files of the Arts program, one of the striking things is how little the mission and focus of the program, and Asialink, changed: the same intention, the same words, and a very similar structure. After 20 years it is still about making opportunities, giving access and providing as much support and encouragement to creative people as possible to make wonderful new works of art that are meaningful to themselves and the huge audiences of region.

Also, of course, the complexity of Asia itself remains. Australians are still not well enough aware of the different cultural mores that underlie so much practice: the importance of not losing face or not questioning authority, and the different processes of getting things done, either through a Communist top-down regime, or a philanthropic, privately (and personally) run enterprise, or a (to us) slow-moving bureaucracy.

Other things have changed: Australian politics have changed, after the high point for a focus on Asia of the Keating years in the early 1990s, to a much lower involvement in the years since. Relationships have changed – from the few 'true-believers' of the early years to the much wider and intertwined relationships gained in more recent times.

With this has come acceptance of personal international relationships. This has gone from the miniscule (and CEO level only) to being normal and expected. Travel was so rare in the start and is now so immediate. Previously it meant applications for special grants. Now Asialink staff travel often and quickly, with expectations of visits built into projects. Equally, the visitors from Asia were rare and treated with great care and deference; now people come through daily. Relationships are our lifeblood so this too has changed the landscape.¹

1. Changes in global communications have also been part of this. Asialink has a reputation for getting things done fast, and this could not have happened without the changes. Asia picked up on the new electronics because their old systems (mail/phone) were often so poor. So from slow letter and phone to the true miracle of fax (we remember knowing that sending faxes to India went through after 6 pm and not before, due to traffic flows, with us standing by the machine to make sure the letters had gone), then the miracle of email.

SOME HISTORY

a) THE FIRST STEPS

This is a personal story. The program developed from a realization of mine in the early 1980s, in Sri Lanka on holiday, that I had never even *heard* of the names of the ancient cultural sites there – wonderful, elegant, extensive sites – despite six years formal art history training in Australia.

I started to do exhibitions, particularly a large one called *East and West* in 1985, at the Art Gallery of South Australia, about the interaction of Asian and European (and Australian) art, an undertaking that further highlighted to me the paucity of available information on visual art of the region post contact with the West. I applied for a Visual Arts Board grant to travel in South East Asia, to see ‘what could be done’ to improve this. Everyone there said they wanted to see more contemporary art, from ‘elsewhere’ – Australia, the world, anywhere. From this I developed an exhibition *Art from Australia: Eight Contemporary Views*, under the umbrella of the Australian Exhibitions Touring Agency (AETA), that travelled to five National Galleries of South East Asia in 1990. Doing this meant I learnt the practicalities of international touring shows, the possibility of getting support from various funding sources, the interest of the audience and the keenness of the artists to take part.

b) ASIALINK

Jenny McGregor, Project Officer at the fledgling Asialink program, had been told of my interest in Asia by Dr Peter Burns of Adelaide University, one of her early colleagues in the field. In 1990 Jenny came to my house, and as she has said, in the kitchen with young children either literally or metaphorically there, asked me to work on an arts project for Asialink. However, due to other commitments, I had to refuse. But I remembered her invitation and, when freer, approached her to see if Asialink would be an umbrella to follow up the *Eight Views* exhibition with a number of projects I wanted to do. She said “sure, but you have to raise the money”, and that was the case then and for the next twenty years.

I put together a program brief of exhibitions of Australian art, and, after discussions with the Australia Council, the idea emerged of linking this to their existing program of Artists Residencies in Asia. We then asked for support from both the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Council. We had a champion at DFAT, in Neil Manton, and at the Council, in Ian Were. They in turn got support from their superiors. We owe both a lot for their trust in our promises of what we could do.

By February 1991 we heard from Les Rowe, Assistant Secretary, Cultural Relations Branch, Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade:

We have studied the proposal carefully and I am pleased to advise you that we are prepared to offer a contribution of \$30,000 as seeding funding to establish the project.

In May 1991, Noel Frankham, Director of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, and Chair of their International Committee Frances Lindsay, with the support of the Board, agreed to match DFAT funds. Les Rowe told us afterwards he wasn't sure he would hear from us again. Little did he know.

Asialink has continued to receive strong support – financial, organizational (both in Canberra and through the Australian Posts in each Asian city), and collegiate (through advice, support and lots of work) – from DFAT ever since. The financial support has been through the central funding source, Cultural Relations Branch, and the various 'bi-lateral' agencies of DFAT like the Australia Indonesia Institute, and so on. We also had on-going support from the Council since that time.

The earliest funding model was \$120,000 per annum: \$40,000 for exhibitions, \$40,000 for residencies, and \$40,000 for administration, including all salaries. By 2010, this increased to around \$760,000 p.a. from both bodies. In 2010 we were told we received the most funding from the Council of any client, outside those of the Major Performing Arts Board.

This is a significant amount of support from the Federal Government for a small agency like Asialink. However, another way to look at this is that for the main Asia-Australia arts program in the country, perhaps it is too small!

c) THE NEW PROGRAM

Our first projects were done on a wing and a prayer. I knew Anne Kirker at Queensland Art Gallery and asked her to take part. She curated an exhibition of Australian prints that was shown in three venues in Thailand. She has recently written:

I am working now with Thai artist Prawat Laucharoen on a collaborative print installation project with artists at his loft space in New York. Mostly we are communicating by email, unlike the very slow and travel-intensive way we achieved shows in the early 1990s.

With the "6x6" exhibition I worked closely with co-curator Somporn Rodboon, from Silpakorn University. She, like myself, had a special interest in printmaking. It was trial and error for us both with this show, although Ajarn Somporn had already organised international print shows for the Gallery at Silpakorn. It was great that curator Roger Butler conducted the first professional practice workshop in Thailand at the time of "6x6". We framed the works in Thailand and sent them on the road after the stint in Bangkok. I will never forget walking – with Robert Pound from the Australia Embassy, and the Khon Kaen University gentleman in charge of organising the event there – along a long veranda to get to the exhibition area, with the doors wide open to a room inside and a draped cadaver waiting for medical students to prod around.³

I approached people who I knew might be open to the possibility of working in Asia, or organizations that were expressing strong interest. QAG of course, then RMIT, and Juliana Engberg – at that time a freelance curator – were all open to the idea.

The *Background Notes*, prepared at the time as guidance for possible curators, are both telling in their practicality and in their surprising relevance still today. They say the exhibition had to be:

- Sensitive to the audience
- Aware of the context
- Aware of constraints, including costs, hardness of the travelling works and physical limits of the host venues.

They also talk of the importance of the curator travelling to represent the show, of the need for them to be flexible “and be able to ‘go with the flow’ when things go wrong” and for artists to be sensitive to the issue that in Asia “Australia’s funding for artists is sometimes seen as lavish”.

Establishing touring venues and hosts for residents in Asia took more time. I’d met various people in South East Asia through the Australia Council research trip in the late 1980s and the subsequent touring *Eight Views* show, so I asked them for help, plus the Australian diplomatic posts. Most people had not heard of the idea of an artist’s residency, so were naturally reticent about commitment. Sometimes, after they agreed, and I thought we had worked out what might be expected, when the artist arrived often these seeming agreements were not translated into action. So everyone had to be very patient, and it is tribute to the artists involved at the time that they not only coped but flowered in the circumstances.

For the touring exhibitions we frequently borrowed directly from artists who were much more accepting of varying physical conditions for the show of their work than public and private collectors. The artists wanted their work to be seen and we made a point always of sending them a detailed report of their show’s tour, including all the considerable press coverage. Despite the varying physical conditions we only ever had two insurance claims: one for willful damage in Vietnam and the other for a dropped crate at Mumbai airport. That is a very good record for a show opening in the region “every 23 days” over twenty years.⁴

3. Email to A. Carroll, 9 August 2010.

4. In 2010 Asialink published a booklet *Every 23 days*, based on the arithmetic of how many exhibitions openings had occurred over the 20 year period, which averaged out as ‘every 23 days’.

SOME KEY PRINCIPLES: THEN AND NOW

1. QUALITY PROGRAMS

The key to all is that everyone, but particularly the arts community, has faith that the quality of the program is excellent. It must have credibility in the arts community. If it does not, no-one will want to be included in it, good staff do not want to be involved, no credible partner in the region will want to join in, and the press and audiences will quickly smell a rat, and rush to leave a sinking ship.

The Arts program has been kept honest by excellent Advisory Committees, key people from around Australia volunteering their time to contribute to, select and confirm the program. They have been artists, curators, theatre practitioners, writers, arts managers, funders, musicians; men and women; older and younger; and always at least one person of Asian-Australian background. This last is important – it keeps a focus on our central issue of engagement in all discussions.

The two main funders – DFAT and the Australia Council – have different agendas: one to support the political and economic interests of the country, and the other to support the interests of the arts community. We said that 80% of the arts in Australia can work within the interests of both, but 10% of DFAT's cultural interests (such as an exhibition on golf because a number of political leaders are keen) and 10% of the Council's (such as a program on sexuality – that would not be useful in a Muslim country) are 'outside the

interests' of the other, and Asialink can happily work within the 80% of the rest, exploring issues of pertinence and relevance.

One sensitive issue for Asialink has been the comment that the program is done because of the interests of politics and business. We have been happy to have the DFAT support, knowing 'politics and business' is their interest, but if the program was not credible artistically to the arts community it would be worthless and quickly die.

2. OPEN TO IDEAS AND NEW VENTURES

From the beginning we looked outwards, trying to bring in others to our work, with ideas, projects, know-how, resources, funds, whatever. Everything has been transparent, with advisory committees appointed from the very first days. The ethos of those days remained: to be active, and open and interested; to say 'yes' before 'no'; to keep the bureaucracy to a minimal edge; to trust people's good sense and good will.

3. WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

We knew we both could not do the work ourselves (we did not have the resources and knew there was little available) plus the impulse was to encourage others to engage in the region by really working there. Bringing in partners with their own support systems to add to the project meant vastly increasing the resources available and spreading the number of people in Australia with knowledge, contacts and interest to do the 'next' program themselves.

This also meant our literal financial budgets (of cash in and out) were vastly smaller than the ‘real’ budgets showing all the support of the partners. In later years when increasingly partners in Asia joined the projects, as in the Japan program for visual arts, the initial support from the Australian Government of some \$500,000 was quadrupled by the income from the partners. While this is a literal way to ‘value’ a partnership, the financial support also translates as real engagement by all involved. There have been times when we have regretted that a partner did not contribute as much as they could have (and blamed ourselves for not making a stronger case to them), as financial contribution does mean commitment, and commitment to a project will always produce a strong result.

4. EXCELLENT PERSONAL NETWORKS

Making things happen needs knowledge, and knowledge in Asia, even more than elsewhere in the world, requires face-to-face engagement. It means being out there: travelling, meeting people, listening, seeing first-hand what the conditions and issues are, and engaging in the ideas and the debate.

The Residency program is literally about making those networks. But all other programs have had people travelling and engaging as central to the success of each. Curatorial exchanges, forums, writers touring, indeed all the programs have had people to people engagement as a given aspect.

All Asialink Arts staff have been encouraged to travel and to get to know places and people. Then the projects can flower. Once back in Australia communication is suddenly easier, people respond, agreements are made. This is what will save a project in trouble. There is no contract or legislation that will cover all eventualities, so the issue is both sides being willing to address the problem, beyond the contract, and fix what might be wrong.

5. ADDING VALUE

Asialink has had to raise all its funds from others, though some have thought we were a funding body. If people have just wanted funds, then we have directed them elsewhere, there being no point in just adding another layer to the bureaucracy. To be involved we usually had to add to a project a mixture of our capacity, our knowledge, our experience, and our work. Practically, the program was run as leanly as possible. People were often surprised that with an Arts staff of 4–5, the program did as much as it did.

THE RESIDENCY PROGRAM

The Visual Arts Board had established the idea of a residency program with Asia in the late 1980s, and had written to people in Asia about it. True to the idea that it takes the networks and commitment to get a program like this going, and as the VAB didn't have the staff to follow up, there had been very little activity by the time Asialink approached them with the idea of an exhibition touring program. Joan Grounds was the only artist to have been on the VAB's program at that time and David Castle was about to go, and that was it. The agreement was that we took over the residency program alongside funding for the early exhibition program.

As noted, the idea of residencies was very little known when Asialink first mooted the idea for Australian artists going to live and work with hosts in Asia. Potential hosts were fearful of what may be in store with foreign artists, often not speaking the local language, and what pitfalls there might be.

The first hosts to emerge were the universities, more used to foreign engagement and travelling people than other 'arts' organizations. Kookmin University in Korea was an early host, Silpakorn in Thailand, and the Jakarta Arts Institute in Indonesia were others (the latter two having relationships built through the exhibition program).

Then, as more Australians went, people grew more confident that problems would not occur. At the same time, there was greater exposure to the idea of residencies internationally. Gradually the arts bureaucracies in various governments started to create their own residency programs, like Taipei Artists Village, and more recently Tokyo Wonder Site. And now there are international conferences about residencies throughout Asia.

By the end of 1991, we had four people going and gradually that built to 40 each year. The arts program published a booklet on the residencies, called first, *35,000 days in Asia*, listing all the residents to that period (2004) and the time they had spent there, followed up by *45,000 days in Asia* (2007), and a 60,000 day booklet is due soon. By 2010 there had been some 600 Australians working for up to four months in the field, across 18 countries, with over 300 hosts.

The VAB has a studio network internationally – of 'bricks & mortar' spaces owned or rented by the Australian side. There is currently one in Asia, in Tokyo. There was another set up in the 1990s in Manila, a surprising city to many, but very rewarding to all the artists Asialink had sent there. Manila had the problem of not having 'appropriate' accommodation for artists, it being either too homely or too 'expat' expensive. So an apartment there was set up, but at a time when funding suddenly became tighter and it was soon closed down.

Asialink had worked on a slightly different premise: that a local host provided help with working space and conditions, helped find accommodation, and in return had access to a 'foreign' artist in whatever way was of mutual benefit. This process was less secure than the studio model, but it meant there were immediate local contacts. It also meant that if something was not going well, we could change away from that host next year, and we could also respond to the interests of Australians. For example, Kookmin was a design/craft focused host, but we realized there was a lot of interest in Australia in other areas of work in Korea, and Ssamzie Space, with a cutting edge, youth-focused new media scene proved very popular, so we were able to adapt to that.

The residency program started with visual arts, then added performing arts and thirdly literature. An important fourth program was for arts managers, an initiative led by then Chair Carrillo Gantner and then head of the Ford Foundation's arts program, Jennifer Lindsay. Their logic was that by introducing arts managers from Australia to regional networks, they then would develop new programs themselves, which is what happened. It also made for stronger links into the then fledgling area of arts management in Asia, with the Australians frequently providing management support to new ventures there. The program has been unusual in supporting arts managers for such experiences, but it is one of its most important aspects.

SECOND STAGE PROGRAMS

Each of the four 'art form' areas, including arts management, have developed what we called 'second-stage' areas of action. This has taken various forms, but basically extended from the individual experience of the residencies and built on them.

a) ARTS MANAGEMENT

- An internship program for Indonesians arts managers to come to Australia extended the residency program available for Australians. It was supported by the Ford Foundation in Jakarta. Asialink produced a booklet *Jalan Jalan* which follows the experiences of the Indonesians hosted around Australia over a 10 year program.
- From the internship program, a further extension was the NT/NTT (Northern Territory/Nusa Tenggara Timur) program, of enabling Territorians and people of Eastern Indonesia to work together on various capacity-building projects. There is a huge amount of scope to develop this area further.
- Yet another extension was the development of a series of arts management how-to booklets for Indonesia: on exhibition touring, event management and community cultural development practice. All were adapted or written specifically for Indonesia, translated and distributed there as a mutually beneficial program.

SECOND STAGE PROGRAMS ...

- **Arts Managers Tours:** Asialink has been the organizer of a number of short tours for arts managers from Asia in Australia, combining visits and lectures with workshop activity. An extension of this has been Australian arts managers teaching at various seminars in the region – including on topics such as lighting, marketing, promotion, and curatorial practice.
- **Teaching:** almost all Asialink staff were encouraged to give talks and lectures in tertiary institutions in Australia about working in Asia, either to curatorial students, arts managers or artists – with the core message being how to think a little differently when working in Asia than one might in Australia.

b) LITERATURE/WRITING

- The main ‘second stage’ program in Literature was the Touring program. Adapted from the Exhibition touring idea, then Literature Manager Amanda Lawrence devised a very ambitious and highly successful touring program for our leading writers. With support from the Australia Council and DFAT, she initiated and under took very intensive tours of around two weeks each to China, India, Korea, Japan and Singapore, often focusing on a book fair, and including readings at bookshops, universities and schools as well as wide ranging discussions with the local literary world. Peter Carey, Tim Winton, Kate Grenville, Alex Miller, Kim Scott, Sonia Hartnett and Geraldine Brooks are among an illustrious group of Australian writers

who took part. Geraldine Brooks had just won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2006 when she put her planned Asialink trip to China ahead of all others. Many rights were sold, books bought, conversations had, and generally the profile of Australian literature raised as never before. It was a missing area. Our stand, shared with Austrade, at an early Beijing Book Fair was the only Australian one there: surrounded by 45 from Europe and America.

- **Writers events:** People love to listen to writers talk about their work. A key part of Asialink’s public program in Australia, mostly in Melbourne but also at Writers Festivals in other states, was organizing various speaking programs for authors. As well as this, Asian writers such as Vikram Seth spoke to huge audiences through us in Australia, extending the public program from leading politicians and economists into more cultural areas.

c) PERFORMING ARTS

- *Swimming with the Tide:* A true ‘second stage’ program, *Swimming with the Tide* asked for ideas from the field of community arts practice, mostly under the performing arts rubric, to devise collaborative projects in Indonesia. A small steering committee selected projects, and Asialink put an organizational umbrella over it all and raised funds to support what people could see as a larger program. Projects included theatre development in Sulawesi, performance in Java and Sydney, and politically-inspired work in Jakarta’s factories.

- *Neon Rising: Australia Japan Dance Exchange* followed the practice of *Swimming with the Tide*, but with a focus on Japan and dance. Five collaborative projects were included, with practitioners from around Australia working with Japanese colleagues to develop a wide range of programs shown in both countries.

d) CROSS MEDIA

There have been various programs that have sought to respond to the increasingly cross-art form practice of many artists. The residency program was flexible in responding to this; *Swimming with the Tide* and the NTT/NT programs both combined what would normally be performing and visual arts projects. An important forum (the Annual Forum for that year, see below) in 2004 focused on this area. We had always been aware that so much of the arts in Asia is not seen in separate silos as is the case in Australia and of the need to respond to this.

VISUAL ARTS

Visual arts stands apart from the ‘second stage’ programs as it has been a core area from the beginning. However, it too has had components which can be separately listed:

EXHIBITION TOURING

This had been the bedrock of the program, strongly supported by funders in Australia as well as partner galleries, institutions and individuals in both Australia and all around the region.

Every 23 days bears witness to the myriad partners in this program. It started with a focus on the “non-FCI” countries, that is, those in Asia which did not have an associated DFAT funding organization, viz the Australia Japan Foundation, the Australia India Council, and so on. This was purely practical as DFAT decreed that if we had used their ‘general’ cultural support money for say Japan with potential AJF support, this would have been ‘double dipping’ into their funding. So the emphasis was on South East Asia (excluding Indonesia) and the smaller countries of South Asia. Generally these exhibitions have been Australian shows touring to a number of venues.

SOUTH EAST ASIAN COLLABORATIONS

From the early touring shows, we developed a number of very rewarding collaborative projects in South East Asia. They include *Rapport* of two Australian and Singaporean curators, and four artists from each country, which then toured to both; *Saisampan*, of four Australian and four Thai artists, curated by a Thai curator and site-specific in Chiang Mai; *Kawing*

VISUAL ARTS ...

of four Northern Territorial artists going to four regional venues in the Philippines and making great work there; and *Pattering* which had a core of Australian work responding to the idea of ‘patterning’ which was then ‘answered’ by local work in Pakistan, the Philippines and Indonesia. A further extension was *Foundations of Gold* where an artist from each of five Asian cities came to Melbourne to collaborate with an Australian partner to produce new work, based on gold, resulting in a show that was then toured to the six (including Melbourne) cities. A more recent example is *Run Artist Run*, of work provided by Artist-Run-Initiatives in Australia, Singapore and Vietnam, all working together. These projects are more complicated to organize than more simple touring shows, but frequently very effective in engagement and reward.

SOUTH ASIA PROGRAM

We had been working in South Asia for a few years when the year of “India” occurred in 1996, which led to the major show *Fire & Life*, which included five Australian and five Indian artists working together in each of their cities, with 10 individual shows resulting. This combined with our strong presence at the Bangladesh Biennale – an unlikely place for this, but like so many ‘unlikely’ places in reality very rewarding – along with specially prepared projects at smaller venues in Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

KOREA PROGRAM

We knew very good things were going on outside this South East and South Asia focus, including the very unknown (to us) country of Korea. So with support of DFAT in 1993 I went to Korea to see what might be possible. This led to an invitation to four young Korean curators to come to Australia, as they, similarly, had no idea of what was going on here. (Kim Sun Jung was one of these young curators, a colleague we have been working with ever since.) And from this, seven visual arts projects in the mid-1990s followed, including a huge tri-partite event at the Seoul Arts Centre in 1996 (of Aboriginal art, craft/design and a general visual arts show), and the exchange with Art Sonje that saw contemporary Korean art come to the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of NSW for the first time.

JAPAN PROGRAM

After the Korea Program, people at the Australia Japan Foundation said “if you can do that in Korea, what about Japan?” So Asialink led a tour of visual arts curators in the late 1990s to Japan, coming back and saying “you cannot keep sending people around without giving them some financial support to actually put things into action”. From that the AJF and the Australia Council supported a three year program, which finally got underway in 2002 until 2004. It was followed by a further multi-year program 2005–09. The first iteration focused on setting up new relationships in Japan with museums ready to host Australian art – Aboriginal art, craft, photo-based work, collaborations, a major solo exhibition, another with

a youth focus and another with a regional focus. The second iteration was much more collaborative, showing the progression to strong professional relationships, with exhibitions of both Japanese and Australian art, co-curated from both countries and touring in both countries. These were paralleled by curatorial visits to Japan and by two important symposia, one in Tokyo and one in Sydney. From this has come the *Utopia* project, an itinerant, visual arts project for the region.

ADVOCACY

- **Forums:** the annual Arts Forum developed into the key annual forum on Asia-Australia arts engagement. It started as a half day engagement for our three art form committee members each July, and spread to becoming a full-day public event with speakers invited from around Asia. Focuses have been on community arts, residencies, cross-cultural collaboration, then on specific countries: China, Japan, Korea and Indonesia. All have been in Melbourne except for one in Brisbane.
- **Publications:** the Arts Program has produced catalogues for each exhibition, plus special publications on programs, aware that because so much is done overseas, it is hard to 'see' it in Australia. A yearly Arts Newsletter has been produced, listing all the Residents for that year.
- **Writing for other publications:** part of Asialink Arts staff's performance requirements was at least one article on their work per year in an external publication. It was seen as good for each person to do this for themselves, for the organization, for the work, and to examine the premise of what is done.
- **Speaking internationally:** all Asialink Arts staff were encouraged to speak at forums in Australia and internationally. It not only promoted the work but enabled better professional engagement and understanding with colleagues and audiences all over the region. There is nothing like speaking to a friendly but critical audience overseas about what you do, to make you examine its efficacy.

CHALLENGES

- Asia remains a difficult concept for many Australians – addressing this remains a key challenge.
- Keeping energy to address this creatively and effectively is a challenge. Asia-fatigue is an issue. Asialink has the problem of being a one-issue organisation – great for acknowledgement of our expertise, bad for people actually listening to our arguments.
- Because Asialink ‘does it’, it seems to take the pressure off others who are better funded to work in Asia (see Challenge 1). The mission is not to become an Asia-ghetto but to spread access to Asian networks and opportunities, so this ‘Asialink is doing it’ mantra can be counter-productive.
- In the arts area, there has been an unfortunate assumption made that Asialink was the ‘running dog of capitalist forces’ i.e. business, in our work in Asia. This is both untrue – business is doing just fine in Asia – and has the undertone of saying cultural engagement with Asia is not important culturally. That is, Asian contemporary culture is not as important or interesting as European. The argument about business is not made when there is an engagement with say Paris or Berlin, because they are seen as important culturally (see Challenge 1).
- Our work is off-shore, and getting the parochial Australian media to report on it has been almost impossible. This is a reason for the special publications like 45,000 days, Sun Walking and Every 23 days (again see Challenge 1).
- Attracting staff with Asia-knowledge (see Challenge 1), plus arts knowledge plus administrative skills, plus excellent inter-personal attributes, for short term (all one-year) contracts is not easy. We have been fortunate that the positive aspects of the job (doing cutting-edge, exploratory work) have attracted excellent people, but all need experience to work effectively in Asia, to know who is who, and how best to make things happen. It’s not work you can just step into.
- Despite our excellent relationships with the key funders, funding remained at best a three-year contract cycle, and was very little compared with funding for, say, work at the Japan Foundation, with which we were compared. (We inwardly laughed at that – if only people knew how small the funds actually were...)

THE FUTURE

The arts sector in Asia in the last twenty years has developed exponentially. At the beginning of the 1990s Australia was in a position to be a leader in the region – with arts training, models for engagement and various cultural developments – but no longer. Every city in Asia it seems has dynamic cultural centres, activities, and international engagements from around the world and increasingly importantly, within the Asian region. Australia has been too slow to proactively take a role in this development.

One reason is the lack of an international strategic body for the arts in Australia. Asialink Arts, while active and effective, has been too small in its capacity to undertake this challenge alone. We need a new body that is clear about our place in the world and works to put that clarity into action. Now is an important moment.

ASIALINK PUBLICATIONS

Cited and available from Asialink or in libraries:

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- *Jalan Jalan, The Indonesia-Australia Arts Management Program 1999–2006, 2006*
- *Sun Gazing, the Australia-Japan Art Exhibitions Touring Program 2002–04, 2004*
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- *Sun Walking, Australia-Japan Visual Arts Partnership Program, 2005–09, 2009*

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- *Fire & Life, India-Australia, 1996-7*
- *Patterning in Contemporary Art, Layers of Meaning, 1997*
- *Kawing, Four Regional Philippines Exhibitions, 2001*
- *Foundations of Gold, Art from Melbourne, Manila, Mumbai, Osaka, Seoul, Singapore, 2001*
- *Saisampan: Soul Ties – Australian and Thai Artists in Collaboration, 2002*
- *Run Artist Run, 2007*
- Indonesian arts management booklets:
 - *Perencanaan dan Pengelolaan Event dan Festival*
 - *Panduan Pengembangan Budaya Masyarakat*
 - *Pameran Keliling Sebuah Panduan Praktis untuk Galeri dan Museum Seni Indonesia, 2010*
- *Every 23 days, 20 Years Touring Asia, 2010*
- Annual Arts Newsletters

