

## 'In my new robe, this morning – someone else' Some thoughts on the cultural underpinnings of critical discourse in Asia

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There is a revealing if simplistic and sometimes criticised cultural survey of world cultures undertaken from the 1960s by Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede, which translates into easily viewed graphs. Although this study began fifty years ago (what, one might ask, is fifty years in the building of cultures?), the reality is, despite rapid changes in technical communication between Western-derived cultures (like ours) and (it seems increasingly to me) all the others, these Hofstede traits remain very important. They affect how art is critiqued differently in Australia and, for example, in Asia, both in the media, in education and in general discourse. And they help all of us to understand why.

Hofstede measured what he called power distance (PDI), individualism (IDV), masculinity (MAS), uncertainty avoidance (UAI), and long-term orientation (LTO). PDI is the extent to which less powerful members of society accept that power is distributed unequally; IDV is found where ties between individuals in society are loose, the opposite of collectivism or the power of the group; MAS is about the differentiation of roles between genders, with men's values being assertive and competitive, and women's values modest and caring; UAI is about tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, including discomfort in unstructured situations,

including open-ended religious belief; and LTO values attributes associated with perseverance in, for example, Chinese cultural terms, but equally short-term orientation also accepts the importance of saving face and social obligations. (See [www.geerthofstede.com](http://www.geerthofstede.com))

The criticism of Hofstede's work is that it is essentialising and ignores the fluid and changing nature of society, as well as the fact that only a small part of each person's response contributes to the measurements of 'difference'. Even if we accept that both criticisms are reasonable, it still leaves a lot of interesting elements to tease out here.

This article focuses on Asia but it is relevant to first question the essentialising of 'Australia' in Hofstede's graph. Numerically, Indigenous Australia would not be statistically significant in this, but culturally many of the qualities of traditional Aboriginal society would be much more aligned with 'Asian' cultural values, than Western mores, in which Hofstede's 'Australia' certainly is placed.

Arts discourse throughout Asia is affected by the qualities articulated: acceptance of authority means you do not criticise those in senior or powerful positions. So senior artists or professors in art schools expect and get (to us) an easy ride in the media. Articles are often genuflective. Their

Simryn Gill, *Untitled (Drawing C)*, 2011, collage and graphite on paper, 195 x 109cm.

Image courtesy the artist and Breenspace, Sydney; from the group show *The Drawing Room*, 20 January to 18 February 2012. Sydney-based Gill will represent Australia at the 55th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale 2013, with an exhibition curated by Catherine de Zegher

views are not challenged by junior students. The only critique of authority over the last 100 years of increasing internationalisation of Asian arts society has come from groups (Hofstede's second point). Art schools in Asia over the last century were founded on Western principles of a professionally appointed staff, curricula, groups of students accepted (often) on merit; all qualities at variance with the old master/disciple relationship of old. Through these new institutions young artists met and bonded together, often aware of changes in the political life around them, and took courage in their alumni groups to challenge society's very structure. This happened, for example, in Shanghai in the 1920s, and in Vietnam and Indonesia in the 1940s, both leading to important art movements and the overturning of political regimes. Even in relatively calm Thailand, the students of Silpakorn University were always the ones to stir ferment.<sup>1</sup> The discomfort with individualism also meant that when artists in Asia in the 1920s painted self-portraits, or portraits of their (young) friends, this was shocking in itself, mocking the careful status quo of accepted society. Hofstede's findings, seen in the graph, are the most extreme on this point.

The gender issue is complex in the graph as it is about personal values. However, in Asia, women artists rise to the fore more rarely than in the West. When you see a successful woman artist, like Amrita Sher Gil, there are exceptional circumstances, like a highly placed family, international education, and other advantages. You often read of husband and wife artists where the wife's career is submerged for her partner. This happens in the West as well, but not as much.

The impact on critical discourse is everywhere. It is accepted as good behaviour in Indonesia to be calm: not to rock the boat in social situations. I recently witnessed two senior women archaeologists from Indonesia sit silently through a workshop in Europe that critiqued archeological and museum practice in Indonesia. They were no doubt unwilling to risk challenge (see these other qualities noted here) but also it was an accepted response to be 'modest and caring' rather than 'assertive and competitive', and so sit silently. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono gets credit in Indonesia for his calm demeanour, as did Megawati, seen as a dignified 'mother of the nation'.

The reverse of this is seen very negatively in many Asian cultures, so when a Western artist upbraids a senior, or is loud or aggressive (even in the name of art), it is met with at best hesitation (as the actions of barbarians, to be tolerated), and worst with disdain. You, the critical or loud person, lose face.

Intolerance about uncertainty strongly influences arts criticism and the way the visual arts work. The graph is counter-intuitive here – Australia is less intolerant of uncertainty. In Australia, visual arts practice is based on experimentation, which is by nature risky. For artists in Asia taking risks is far harder, in the main, and when they do, like Ai Wei Wei, they certainly understand the extra outrage from society at their brazen dissent. Chinese artists since the late 1980s have been very daring in their actions internationally and were highly regarded for this risk-taking long before the Chinese economic giant started to show its strength. (It's another example of artists being in the forefront of social action.)

Singapore's recent art history is a good example here. Culturally, Singapore is Confucian, both in the Chinese cultural dominance and the political underscoring of Confucian values by leaders like Lee Kuan Yew, with consequent acceptance of top-down, respectful relationships to power, and discomfort with individual expression and uncertainty. Lee Kuan Yew This was the



1/ Johnny Bulun Bulun, *Body Design*, 2006, etching on paper, platemark: 19.5 x 12.5cm; sheet 50 x 33.5cm. The Collection of Colin and Elizabeth Lavery

2/ Titarubi, *Read*, 2011, detail; wooden school table with open book; installation view, Equator # 1, Jogja Biennale XI, 2011; photo Dwi Oblo



Wimo Ambala Bayang, *Troop* series, 2008, digital c-print, 120 x 120cm. Image courtesy the artist and Cemeti Art House; from the Residency Project Landing Soon# 7

official line attitude in of the island-state in the 1990s, when various avant-garde groups like the Artists Village were emerging, which led to an infamous clamp-down on artistic activity. (The censorship of a performance where pubic hair was provocatively involved led to all art performances (and related texts) having to have prior approval by the government.) It has been a painful re-emergence from this position that still can hover over heads in conservative Singapore's contemporary. Its decorum is very nice in many ways but without the let-it-rip feel that one gets in places where Confucius is less obvious, such as the Philippines.

Confucian influence is even stronger in China itself. When the Chinese artists were so challenging in the 1980s you can point to the Cultural Revolution as a key break in these beliefs, allowing the unallowable for ten tumultuous years. It is salient that now calm has returned to China, much of the art is reflecting traditional Chinese values, based on notions of meditative brush painting practice. In Hindu Asia, you are marked by your caste at birth and you cannot change it – you accept. In India I am often struck by the lack of politically challenging work being made. If it is at all critical it is a personal criticism of, for example, gender or religious prejudice. In Islamic Asia, again you accept your role in society, in the community. This can lead to unfamiliar practices for Australian artists. I remember one Asialink artist-in-residence in Indonesia never being left alone in her studio, as her host organisation was appalled by the idea of such solitude. So someone always came in and sat with her. You see this in the actions of young Indonesians, working so happily together in the Punkasila band, for example, and other well-known artist-collectives (Mes56, Ruangrupa, Tromorama). It is a predominantly talking, communicating, active, personal culture. Books rarely get read in this environment – things get said and shown to be shared as a group, not written or read in the solitude that activity needs. Any visit to a bookshop in Indonesia quickly shows this truth: the bookshops are generally out-of-the-way and reveal a surprising modesty, not just of critical content but literary production per se.

All of this helps explain the reality of art theory and criticism training in art schools, the paucity of printed discourse in the wider community, and the lack of a strong conference or seminar culture inviting in others from elsewhere. There are of course individual educators/commentators with strong views, and a culture of some published discourse and seminars (and I think of what the Japan Foundation has done in this area) but it is less overt than in the West, and it is more polite when it happens. Form can overrule function, so a long-winded paper isn't stopped, nor is there passionate dispute.

The teaching of art theory and history in Asia is focused on European art and local culture. It rarely crosses into pan-Asia studies. Because a critique is both culturally difficult and of a culture (in the case of Europe) less known, the interface can be relatively simple. Asialink ran a forum with Japanese visual arts thinkers in Sydney in 2008 (16-17 June, at the Australia Council), and one of the issues raised was 'lack of knowledge' of Asian art in Japan and how to best deal with that. Online material, available in both Japanese and English so it was more widely accessible, was seen as the way forward, but it needed both writers to do it and funds to get it off the ground. It hasn't happened yet.

The last of Hofstede's qualities is long-distance planning, clearly evident in Chinese and Japanese society, including in arts practice. The traditional arts of Asia are treated with calm and serious respect and their representation in museum exhibitions conveys a feeling of timelessness. Into this comes the raucous Western child of contemporary practice, viewed with horror by many, ignored by others, and taken up often slightly guiltily by young people, where speed and immediate gratification are the norm. Contemporary art practice gets caught in this, where decisions are made by senior people, who want time and consensus, but the reality is quick, quick, quick. One instance of the difficulty has been the planning of the Yokohama Triennial in the past, where you feel the length of the decision by those in power in direct conflict with the speed needed to get the show on the road. It's led to some



Koh Nguang How, *Artists in the News*, 2011, installation with newspaper archive and ongoing research, dimensions variable; commissioned by the Singapore Biennale 2011. Image courtesy the artist; photo Singapore Art Museum

feelings of it being a bit 'last minute', the reverse of the intention. And it is saved, at least at home, by the reluctance to criticise it and so cause loss-of-face. In Australia there would be a media bloodbath.

This is not wrong – it is just different.

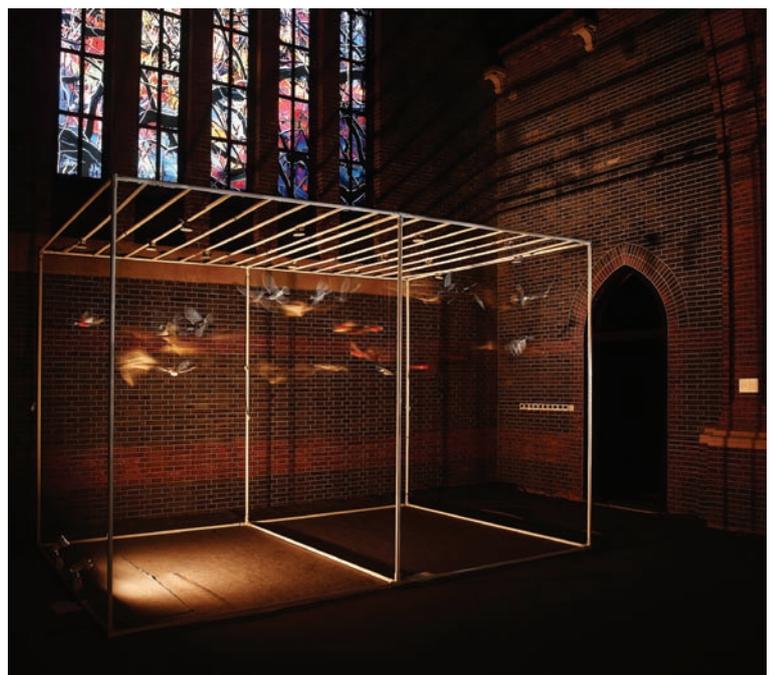
Indeed it can seem we in the West are over-focused on critique and theory, though I feel the extremes of recent years in Australia have leavened to a more accessible practice. My art-jargonometer is decidedly on a descent. I used to react badly to the words 'research' in the proposals for Asialink residencies, thinking artists don't do 'research', rather they make and create things/entities, but knew the pressure to be 'academic' was pushing art schools to promote such words.

Perhaps we can learn more from these different attitudes in Asia – to live and let be; to accept and absorb; to let the work flow over and around us; not to verbally analyse it so forcefully or subjectively, nor having to impress 'what we think of it' immediately or in public. As Basho Matsuo wrote in 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan, to accept:

In my new robe  
this morning –  
someone else.<sup>2</sup>

1. See Alison Carroll, 'Masters and Pupils; the Rise of the Modern Art School in Asia; Some Key Issues regarding their Establishment, Curricula and Place in the Communities', in L Joubert (ed.), *Educating in the Arts; the Asian Experience*, Dordrecht, 2008, pp. 31-45. 2. Basho Matsuo, *Haiku*, translated by Lucien Stryk, Penguin, 1985, p.1.

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Hema Upadhyay's installation for *The West Heavens* project (curated by Dr Chaitanya Sambrani), Shanghai, 22 October to 20 December, 2010. <http://westheavens.net/en/>

Pages 66 & 67: Joel Gailer, *1/1*, 2012, digital print / magazine 'intervention' especially created for *Art Monthly's* 'Critical lining' issue, in response to the notion of 'the art of art criticism'. Gailer explains his approach: This work, from my perspective as a print media artist, discusses issues about print, publications, mass production, the copy, the unlimited edition, authenticity, the art market, and the much-contested space of the original and the unique. I don't believe there is such a thing as an original, I believe ideas surrounding uniqueness are related to ideas about god and have their formation in religion. This position is very hard for an art audience to accept, as we are always talking about the 'mark' and the artist as some kind of unique anomaly in human kind - which I think is completely bogus. Printmaking, for me, holds the key to these questions as its role as the manufacturer of the copy – but is itself an art technology and has a quality that sits comfortably on the fence between the concept and production. [www.joelgailer.com](http://www.joelgailer.com)