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Alison Carroll

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Countless arts projects in Australia-Asia arts projects falter over different understanding of time.



Image via zazzle.com

I have worked on hundreds of Australian/Asian cultural exchange projects over the last 25 years, mostly in the visual arts, but also across performing arts and writing exchanges, and remain frustrated that there is so little understanding both in the “West” and also in specific Asian countries of the backstory behind decisions made on the other side of the negotiating table. I am on a continuous voyage of learning, and the insights and light-bulb moments of recognition remain some of the greatest rewards of this area of work.

There remains a superficial response by Western visitors to Asia that as locals wear jeans, drink coffee, and frequently speak English, so they must also think and behave like Westerners. More importantly, I am also aware of the advantages of how using a different cultural position might make for more successful outcomes both with each particular project, and also, in this increasingly global world, for practice in what is (in the West at least) a mono-cultural post-Enlightenment situation.

It can be argued that there are broad cultural differences between the West and non-Western cultures based on different ideas of time and space. Let me elaborate, and start with time. In broad terms, the West has prized the precise measurement of progressive time, and the idea of progress itself, since the Enlightenment, which led into the great age of European colonization. The glory of the Enlightenment and justifiable Western pride in the achievements of scientists, engineers, philosophers, economists, political innovators, musicians, writers and artists, caught the crest of the colonization wave, and landed on the various beaches of these colonial outposts with loud and self-important crashes. Today we are at the end of this colonial period, sorting out the detritus of this landing on the shore, and the need to unpick the power of this Enlightenment certainty.

Progressive time is measurable; it maps a future with only rare reference to the past, looking to a certain outcome at a generally accepted point of a process. For arts managers in the West, this is taken for granted. In other cultures, including Indigenous Australia, other values of time take precedence. Buddhism and Hinduism promote circular time, with time repeating. It references back to the past. Arts practice often reflects this. An example is gamelan music in Indonesia which is based on cycles, building intensity, pulsating as the layers are added. Indigenous Australians look back to their ancestors, from where all reference points come. In Imperial East Asia, time is measured in the repeating eras of each dynasty, starting again with the beginning of a new family's ascent to the throne. Arts managers in Indigenous Australia and Asian countries know of Western progressive time, and understand the (unthinkingly single-minded) expectations of Western colleagues.

Nevertheless, there are countless examples of projects faltering because the rigid application of Western "time" is either not valued sufficiently or other time values have intruded. There are practical and cultural issues here.

In practice, this means that when a project with a Western colleague is underway and another pressure occurs—such as a religious or family festival for example—the other pressure will often subvert the Western one, and subvert it without the local person informing the Westerner of its importance. The Westerner is left dangling.

In practical terms, it means time-lines and forward planning are foreign and less-valued concepts. The measurements of a project's life, such as time to plan, time to research, time to commit, time to raise funds, and so on, can be set aside—not because of laziness or slackness, but because they are not important. Deadlines can come but there is less focus on their importance, and they can slip by.

It might be useful to think of this with more human values in mind: that this is a much saner way of life, with relational values of the type of engagement being more highly prized than ticking off the measurable (that is, numerical) outcomes. In the West, how often is a project done, those various "measurables" achieved, and then everyone moves on, without reflection, without really investigating whether or not it was worthwhile? In my experience, the joint, cross-cultural projects that took more time to set up, that had so many more cross-cultural issues raised in the process, that took more effort and often more money, were always the ones that people remembered, often for years and with great affection. The people in Asia with whom I worked on those projects are those I turn to today, often many years later, for further engagement—and they always say "yes". I have argued for many years that government-sponsored "national" cultural events in other countries will be so much more effective if these principles are adopted. However, short-term "Western" time-lines and numbers take over, with little care for ongoing relationships. The outcomes are ticked off, the bureaucrats do one of their usual job-changes, relationships are cut off, the report is submitted and the juggernaut moves on.

The seesaw of valuing the arts—between the Western numerical measurable and the human quality of the experience of maker and audience—might learn from this different, non-Western point of view. More particularly, if Westerners who want to engage in Asia understand this and build their project

around such understanding—growing projects over time spent on engagement, projects with various facets that might weave in and out, a series that reflects back, projects based on relationships than can flex rather than hard time-line projects without any human nuance—then they will be much more effective and rewarding.

And the point applies to various cultures within Asia working with each other. While they will be aware of the broader different issues of time, there will be local nuances (especially across belief differences) where understanding of what one's partner is thinking about this issue, will result in a better outcome. A well-known example of the complex nature of how time is interpreted within Asia is the expectation of punctuality in Japan, unlike in many countries of South East Asia. In Japan, this punctuality is part of the importance of “respect” between people—a part of social, human interchange—rather than punctuality for its own sake.

This article is an edited extract from [Arts and Cultural Leadership in Asia](#) edited by Josephine Caust and published by Routledge.

About the author

Alison Carroll has been an academic, critic, writer, curator and administrator of art exhibitions and artists exchanges with Asia for over 30 years. She established and was Director of the Arts program at Asialink, University of Melbourne and was made a Member of the Order of Australia for her work at Asialink.

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Alison Carroll

MONDAY 10 AUGUST, 2015

Appropriate museum display of Asian art requires an understanding of Eastern philosophy.



Hiroshi Sugimoto Time Exposed: #367 Black Sea, Inebolu, Image via [Paddle8](#)

In the second in a three part series, Alison Carroll moves from examining how different concepts of time affect artists working in Asia to looking at what the different spatial approaches mean for cross cultural art projects.

When looking at various objects, including fish in a glass fish tank, what do you “see”? Westerners tend to see the foreground fish and Easterners tend to see the whole tank—the fish, large and small, the water, sand, glass and air. In other words, they see the various aspects arranged in relationship to each other.

This goes to the heart of the perceived communal nature of the East in comparison with the individualism of Western culture. This is an issue articulated by Hegel in the early nineteenth century, analyzed by anthropologists and sociologists and critiqued by cultural commentators particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, and most famously by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, which is often translated, particularly for business groups, under the rubric of “cultural intelligence”.

The most precise anthropological data is seen in Geert Hofstede's graphs based on analyses of different cultures in the 1960s and 1970s.

However, these texts are ignored or unknown by those working in arts cross cultural engagement, and while again bearing the taint of "essentializing", they can shed light on this work, again, both for practical and broader conceptual reasons.

A very real example of spatio-relational ways of "seeing" a culture is how objects in museums are displayed. The museum has been a Western-devised "special place" separating objects from their context—and seeing them either isolated or/and in comparison with objects often coming from different contexts (either spoons, or Abstraction), taking not only conceptual context but physical context from each piece. In terms of Asian societies, each piece, like the fish in the tank, is seen in relation to what is happening in that space, either psychically or physically. Each piece needs to be part of a wider magic, or a wider truth.

One of the most effective museum displays I have seen was the Hiroshi Sugimoto solo exhibition at Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. Each piece was displayed in relation to each other, to the room and to how the audience would approach and move through that environment. Pieces were shown on the back of walls, so the person had to walk around to have the revelation; floors were raised and obvious museum spaces challenged, and small and large spaces enhanced the power of each piece. The visitor came out transformed, moved, excited: seeing the artist's work in a way that took it into an experience of profundity. The whole had been staged by the artist himself, but with the support, obviously, of the museum.

How often is this capacity ignored in displays, especially, of Asian art or art of cultures where this wider reality is so integral to it? Another example, closer to home, where the work itself triggered a physical (and emotional) engagement was Dadang Christanto's *For those who are suffering* at the 1993 Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane. The audience spontaneously brought in flowers and laid them through the installation, acknowledging the power of the work, and passing on to other people viewing this, that we can be literally involved in such a display. There is lip service currently, but what if museum designers were given a course in Asian cultural philosophies, to see the advantage of taking on board a more holistic way to approach this? It would modulate the experience of the visitor through a cross-cultural collection, and add to the dynamic energy of the whole institution. It is all about seeing each piece within its own community and its own space.

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MONDAY 17 AUGUST, 2015

The artists as individual, innovator or iconoclast are Western archetype unhelpful in working with Asian art.



Bainese stone carvings, Ubud, Imaga via [Wikipedia](#)

In the third in a series, Alison Carroll moves from [Asian concepts of time and Asian philosophies of space](#), to examining how different values of community and individual play out in cross-cultural art exchange.

Christine Nicholls, writing in *The Conversation* in July 2013, describes the way Central Desert Aboriginal culture inculcates an [awareness of relational space into the smallest babies](#). They nod to directions in relation to themselves, rather than an abstracted, mathematical understanding of an area. The nature of the whole implies that all parts have a place within it—it is a communal understanding, with each individual having a place within society.

To go against this—putting one's hand up and getting individual attention—breaks the harmony of this understanding. In arts engagement, a younger individual questioning an elder, who may be the agreed spokesperson for the group, destabilizes the accepted order, and provokes consternation. Young people looking an older person too boldly in the eye breaks protocol. Western foreigners are

given some allowance for such bad behavior but if the right behavior is acknowledged, the project will go so much more smoothly.

There are numerous examples of the strength of the hold of the communal way in Asia and its impact on cross-cultural engagements. One is a natural conservatism from officialdom, not wanting to stand out and take a risk. It might end with a 'loss of face', but it also makes that individual seem to be putting him- or herself above the rest. Groups make decisions, including in curatorial settings. The status quo often holds for this same reason—"risk" is a problem culturally. The more conservative the group or institution, the more likely this will be the scenario. It means that younger, more provocative individuals will either work for less institutional employers, including private and philanthropic companies and individuals, or for projects that need international (Western) understandings, like Biennales, where greater cultural leniency can be possible.

The tensions in the organization of some Biennales in Asia comes from the pressure to conform to harmonious, communal values, and to make a project that by its nature in international contemporary art circles, challenges those values. The issue with the Jakarta Biennale IX of 1993–94 is an example of the disjunction between local and "international" values in the visual arts, with artists, organizers, funders, and audiences in a melee of upset, and ultimately leading to the demise of the project. I cannot think of Biennales in the West where this becomes such an issue.

Innovation by artists can be seen as inappropriate or disrespectful in the face of traditional respect for the established way. Traditional practice like brush painting in East Asia is more subject to this, but the knowledge of the traditions remains through the more avant-garde sectors, which often reflect on it or overtly reject it as part of their personal stand. This does not happen in the West. Academic oil painting, for example, might be part of a critique but the focus is not as loaded as it is in the East. It seems ironic that Chinese artists today are some of the most skilled in the world in oil painting on canvas, but this derives from the same practice of learning from elders and then transmitting to the next generation. The Chinese had to learn the practice of oil painting from the Soviet Russian example under Mao's directive in the early 1950s, and it became the centre of their academic art practice, so their skills even today are outstanding. This idea of the importance of the group, of communalism, and suspicion or even rejection of individualism has echoes in other forms of arts practice to do with Asia internationally.

One trend in (Western) art museums has been for Asian art departments to focus on iconography, rather than treat the artwork as Western art would be—with Western art historical stylistic analysis, endeavoring to see individual masters, ateliers and trends through the art under their analysis.

An issue for Asian art departments has been their separation from mainstream sections of museums. The very expertise expected in language and culture makes specialists of the staff and can set up ghetto mentalities, something governance of many museums seem either unwilling or unable to address.

The "Eastern" mindset mitigating against approbation of individual artistic achievement has led to an equally Eastern communal approach to curatorial research: themes, content or iconography, the group style, are what curators identify rather than significant individual artist research and the building of an understanding of their particular oeuvre. How many detailed monographs of pre-twentieth-century artists of the East exist? Not many. Imagine Rubens being a name amongst the Flemish school without the research to uncover every one of his drawings, paintings, and students? This Western art historical methodology of minute and careful recording is just one way to undertake museum work. It can, indeed, obscure the great enjoyment of the spirit of an artwork, which may be the central desire for audiences, both secular and religious, in the East. But perhaps both approaches can be applied. A challenge to this in 2011 has been the Rietberg Museum in Zurich's research into the ateliers of the Mughal and Rajput rulers of India, identifying more than 40 masters and their styles.

Australia has provided a mixed response in extending this individual acknowledgement to Indigenous art. Certainly Indigenous artists' names are known and their oeuvre respected, but besides two or three individuals (e.g. Emily Kngwarreye or Rover Thomas), their names are not remembered by Western audiences—they become part of the general communal group known as Indigenous Art. A similar situation applies to Balinese masters—a few individuals are identified amongst the great number of artists who come under first the Balinese, then the individual township stylistic banners.

The respect for seniority, tradition and the communal whole has led to what I see as mistakes in the presentation of Eastern art in the institutions of the West, notably the collecting museums. We put aside the question of whether this activity is both the best use of resources and the best way to introduce such cultures to those in the West (very debatable points), to see how it has played out in London. Two of the most prestigious, old-fashioned, patriarchal institutions, the British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum, have been targeted by Korea and Japan, using their excellent funding capacity, to display their traditional treasures. However, the work has been placed near the side stairs (the Korean work at the Victoria & Albert Museum) or up the back stairs (Japanese at the British Museum); both areas little visited and noticed by the rank and file of visitors. I noticed a sense of regret on the faces of the visiting nationals of those countries. I suspect their efforts would have been much more effective at a more overtly iconoclastic institution such as the Tate Modern. But, and this is my surmise, the instinctive response of the decision-makers of the East was the desire to be aligned with those more venerable, respectable places.

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