

Art, Art Museums, Asia and us

By Alison Carroll

The Asialink Centre of the University of Melbourne has worked with contemporary art exchange between Asia and Australia for some six years now and this article is written from this context.

Can you name one or two or five curators from Asian art museums? Can you name the best art museums in Asia? Or some major internationally focused exhibitions initiated by them and their staff?

No? You are not alone.

There are dozens of major art museums in Asia and more are being built all the time. Many are very fine and prestigious, with excellent amenities and long experience of devising their own locally based exhibitions, as well as accepting shows from abroad. However, they are mostly very poor at initiating international projects which either incorporate their own cultural material, or which engage on bilateral bases both within Asia and with other continents.

In Australia we are rarely requested to take exhibitions from these institutions or to engage in projects with them. So, usually, unless we initiate the contact, we do not know them or their staff.

I suspect that at this stage you are rummaging through your mind to disprove this statement. But think of the examples of contemporary art from Asia seen in Australia. The Asia Pacific Triennial is generated by the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG). The Adelaide Festival exhibition 'Beyond the Material World' was Australian based. The single nation exhibitions, like those from China ('Mao Goes Pop'), Taiwan ('Arttaiwan'), Japan ('Zones of Love'), India ('India Songs; Fire and Life') and Singapore ('Rapport'), have all been initiated by Australian curators (and then, to be fair, developed often in partnership with Asian curators). General or theme based exhibitions have of course included artists from Asia, but the same point applies. (This is not a criticism of the exhibitions themselves, which have all been very credible.)

Things are slightly changing on a wider international front. The Venice Biennale now includes both official and non-official exhibitions of art from Asia, initiated and organised by local curators.

Venice is currently the main exception to the lack of international focus, and obviously to a large extent is driven by other agendas (like government backing), but the Biennale may give impetus to Asian curators to extend the experience given.

Many Asian Governments espouse an internationally active agenda in principle. A main focus of the Korea Foundation and the Japan Foundation for example is to promote their own culture internationally. Also, artists in Asia, in my experience, are extremely keen to have their work seen abroad and to undertake international exchanges. What stops the curators and institutions? An explanation lies in the local culture.

It is always problematic to raise the differences of 'Asian' cultures, which are often simplistically or

politically used. However, it can be said that respect for authority, respect for position, respect for 'face' (and very real fear of losing this), respect for control, and respect for tradition, and desire for harmony are much more strongly felt in Asian countries than in those of the West. An October 1996 *Far Eastern Economic Review* notes the results of a survey of its readers on their 'Asianness'. It notes the differences of attitude within the region, but also some major areas of consensus. Here is one example: 'respect for authority, harmony and learning were highly valued by the Asian people surveyed, and considered a low priority by Westerners. Conversely, freedom of expression is seen as vital by Westerners, but not considered important by many Asians, particularly in Singapore and Taiwan. Filipinos, with their lively independent press, are an exception.' And another: 'A hefty 47% of Singaporeans did not care or felt "neutral" about human rights as an issue. The three groups in Asia who were most concerned about human rights were Western expatriates, Australians and the Japanese.'

Artists in Asia negotiate these positions. If you accept that artists challenge status quos, then being an artist in Asia is necessarily complicated. Being overtly critical - in both the broadest, discursive sense as well as focusing on specific issues - in Confucian-based, harmony-driven societies is often problematic. Some artists are very oblique in their critiques and the references need explanation to outsiders. When overtly critical, the artist knows there will often be social (or worse) reactions. Singaporean censorship is well known. Critiques of paternalistic societies by women artists are much more potent in Asian than here. References to gender issues are not undertaken lightly. References to specific political issues in countries less used to democracy can indeed be dangerous.

(It is true that some artists do feel freer to make politically or sexually overt work outside their societies than within them. This is sometimes questioned, on the basis that the artist is not being 'true' to his or her own culture and is pandering to 'western' expectations. It is an interesting dilemma, but surely to some degree we all adjust our work for the particular audience...)

It is even harder for curators, who are usually employed by the state or by corporations. As in Australia, governments and corporations are comfortable with supporting traditional or historical exhibitions for all the obvious reasons of prestige, tested 'quality' and absence of problematic, subversive agendas. But if a curator or an institution in Asia is working with contemporary art, there is the additional issue of cultural pressure not to promote displays of conflict or challenge, reinforced by the nature of the employer.

In societies where age and status are important, respect for older artists is assumed. The western promotion of new, controversial, challenging and

often young artist's work is frequently questioned by those in power in and outside arts organisations in Asia and deemed inappropriate and certainly unrepresentative of local culture. The local curator must work with this - and it seems to be a much tougher and more complicated role than we in Australia understand and acknowledge.

For some international exhibitions, especially in the region (like touring ASEAN shows), the local cultural pressures on Asian curators increase, and often a more conservative, traditional, older generation can take precedence. An uninformed foreigner looking at some official catalogues of contemporary art from Asian countries will often misread the representation on this basis. The art institutions of the region are currently almost always headed by older, more conservative men. Often it is the younger curator who understands the international agenda and easily negotiates on an international level, but finds it impossible to convince his or her superior of these very different situations.

There are young, very knowledgeable, active and keen curators in Asia, but often they have neither the status nor the cultural position to make their own marks. They are subject to a hierarchy of approval. These curators, outvoiced in selection, and unwilling to publicly criticise their elders, suffer because outsiders do not realise a lot of more radical art is excluded because of deference to these elders. This is where working at the invitation of outsiders, especially from the West, can free the local curator from these constraints. It places responsibility on others and can be a good mechanism by which to negotiate locally with no-one losing face.

(One irony of Australia's role in this is that I think of all nations of the world, rightly or wrongly, we hold fondly to values which are at the opposite extreme of the so-called Asian ones. We are anti-authoritarian; we regard equality as an extreme virtue. Youth can get precedence over age. It is important for us at all levels to be seen to do menial jobs, for example, for curators to use hammers and brooms and physically work to put up exhibitions, to show they do not regard themselves as above others in status.)

One other part-cultural, part-historical issue arises in the region for those of us interested in museum exchange: compared with the West, there is little expectation of the public system working in the interests of its constituency. By and large, in Australia, government institutions are respected and expected to be proactive, and work for us. Most Asian countries do not have this history. There are other systems - based on family, clan, language or ethnic group - in which to trust. When the question is asked about why a museum is not active, the answer is often a look of surprise to think that it *could* be so.

Sometimes, too, the reasons are organisational. If the museum is under the Ministry of, say, Education, staff can be rotated through it who have no relevant cultural experience. And within this larger system, the museum can have lower career status, so less able people are sent there. Working in museums does not bring high salaries, and sometimes, in a 'tiger' economy, this is an important issue for younger, bright people. Also, with the economies of the region growing so rapidly, and more funds becoming

available to spend on cultural institutions, there is an inevitable time lapse for experienced, qualified staff to become available to fill all the positions. For example, The National Gallery of Malaysia has been waiting to appoint a Director for some years. Understandably, for important cultural institutions like this, there is a desire to appoint a local expert.

Another reason for the lack of overt international initiative from the cultural institutions is the issue, often felt by all public servants, risk taking. This again is magnified in Asia, when making what is judged a public mistake and thereby losing face is a much worse humiliation than here. I remember one museum director in South East Asia who, on hearing reports of poor reviews of an exhibition organised by his institution in America, was appalled and said they would never do a similar project again. He was so unused to negative public comments in his own culture, that to have them from America was really shocking. I should perhaps note here that this is an important reason why art criticism as we expect it does not usually occur in Asia - the person who criticises loses face as well as the person or art work criticised. Some people in Australia think it is because 'Asia has not caught up' with such practices.

So, what will happen? John Prescott, head of BHP, recently said that success in Asia meant success in the rest of the world. In this climate, will Asian arts infrastructure become easier for Westerners to approach? Will globalisation of the world impinge on the authority modes noted in the *Economic Review* and flow through to cultural organisations?

Or more overwhelmingly for all of us, will the changes, particularly in China, mean a strengthening of the so-called Asian positioning? Asian values are being espoused more and more obviously - taken for granted in public forums in the region. Will the new Shanghai Museum ('state of the art' as it is) affect the international Chinese museum agenda? Senior officials from the Ministry of Culture in Beijing recently in Australia clearly expressed interest in 'conservative' art visiting from Australia. Will China's increasingly strong role tip balances in our art world? Will this put pressures on where we thought them lifting? Will we have to negotiate with Chinese cultural agendas as we currently do not? The relationships between Korea, Japan and China are changing, with growing cultural exchanges, reinforcing the East Asian cultural bloc. Will China's agenda sway the way others in the region interact, and make the difficult negotiation with Western ways easier to avoid?

I used to think all the museums of the region would increasingly look to open, global (yes read 'Western') agendas, showing work which challenges society, and increasingly engages in international exchanges, but now, I wonder. The role of the Asian curator remains pivotal here, almost a symbol of the centre of the difficult seesaw balance - between a conservative cultural ethic, an expanding regional art administration, and the more and more confident international artist. Which way will the seesaw settle, and for how long?

Asialink, despite the questions raised in the article, continues to encourage partnerships with curators in the region. The Centre has moved from facilitating 'straight' touring exhibitions towards more bilateral