

# ART AND SOCIAL CHANGE

*Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*

EDITED BY CAROLINE TURNER

# CHOPPY WATERS: Arts infrastructure and networks in Asia

*Alison Carroll*

BEFORE 1900, ART in Asia was controlled by those who ruled: the kings, the emperors and the sultans, followed by colonial masters, with some sway from priests and scholars. This has changed in the past 100 years, with institutions, communities and the middle classes increasingly involved.

The most important change, collapsed into a much shorter time frame than in Europe, has been the growth of teaching institutions, and their central role in the art life of most countries of the region. Previously, in most Asian countries, younger artists were taught either individually or in ateliers by master artists, akin to the European apprentice system. The new schools, based on European models, had groups of students gaining entry in a much more open manner, and taught by professional teachers employed for this purpose, teaching specified curricula. They were established first in the Philippines, India, Japan and Australia, and, in turn, gave those societies the longest experience of the potential power and influence of the arts community. The histories of these art schools, with their particular dominating individuals, factions and interest groups, as well as their focus on specific trends and ideas,

have been very important throughout the region. By their nature, with the intention to open up the field of art practice more widely, it was revolutionary. It further opened doors to the study of other cultures through the books and magazines they imported and made available. In turn, this encouraged the study of Western art. And because they were often the only focus for artists and younger generations in particular, their success became even more important in each society. It can be said that the commercial nature of an art school, with a cohort of students moving through the studies, identifying and supporting each other's sympathies in many ways, and a government system where hubris is frowned on,

The founding and focus of each country colonised by Europe was a strategy to learn European techniques competitive with the West. The first school was founded in Tokyo, where skills equal to the West were the capacity of oil painting and the illusion of light and shadow. It realised this was one of the keys to success. Uncolonised countries introduced Western

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and supporting each other, was conducive to 'community' sympathies in many Asian societies — where, at one end, a government system is not trusted and, at the other, individual hubris is frowned on — and this helped their success.

The founding of the schools, however, reflected the interests and focus of each country. The countries of East Asia that were not colonised by Europeans opened their schools as part of their strategy to learn European technologies and therefore remain competitive with the new powers. The Technical School of Art was founded in Tokyo in 1876 to train Japanese artists in utilitarian skills equal to the West. Among other techniques, it introduced the capacity of oil paint to create atmospheric perspective and an illusion of light and space. The Chinese followed when they realised this was one of the secrets of Japan's economic and military success. Uncolonised Thailand also took the initiative and introduced Western art ideas via its School of Fine Arts, now at



Art Tower Mito  
Mito Japan  
Image courtesy  
Art Tower Mito  
Architect: Arata Isozaki

Silpakorn University, from 1933. In contrast, the schools of South Asia, such as the Mayo School of Arts (now the National College of Arts) established in Lahore in 1875 as part of British colonialism, had a curriculum, writes Pakistani academic Salima Hashmi, that 'reflected the contradictions between the local art tradition and the dominant British aesthetic. The continuity and richness of the varied local painting tradition was taken over by the Victorian predilection for the academic and sentimental in art.'

The early decades of the 20th century saw many important political challenges to the status quo, often involving young artists grouped with and around the schools, an example being the young artists who protested about French colonial attitudes in Hanoi in the 1930s. Evariste Jonchère, who in 1937 became the head of the College of Fine Arts — still the most important art school in Indochina — said the Vietnamese could be trained only as artisans. This led to action by students challenging him to compare his own work with that of the pagodas and communal houses of Vietnam for 'vigour, meaning and spirituality'.<sup>2</sup> These students were part of the movement that eventually led to the overturning of French rule.

Today, more than in other parts of the world, these same schools continue to hold crucial roles within their cultures. Their teachers hold positions more esteemed than in the West. In part, this is related to the respect in Confucian societies for learned elders, but it also relates to the strength and importance of the infrastructures. Look around Asia now, and we see, taking a random selection, the Tokyo University of Art, Hong-ik University in Seoul, LaSalle and Nanyang in Singapore, the University of the Philippines in Manila, the Central School of Art in Beijing, the Baroda School of Art in India, Silpakorn and Chulalongkorn in Bangkok — all key institutions in the region, all employing influential artists, writers and cultural leaders. Increasingly, the staff of each institution speak to each other, attend meetings and publish articles and books that are read across the region; and the introduction of new technologies makes contact by staff and students increasingly easier. A quick glance at who is asked to curate and write about artists of their own countries, especially outside East Asia, will show more teachers at these schools involved than curatorial staff of the museums.

For the most part, these schools are infrastructures supported by the relevant government. In contrast, the other institutional

support for the art a much more complex museums supported exceptions, not w supported by the rewarding, especia

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support for the arts community in Asia, the museum, has had a much more complex and varying history. It can be said that the museums supported by governments are, with some notable exceptions, not working very successfully for artists, while those supported by the private sector are much more dynamic and rewarding, especially in the past few years.

Again, the museums, including art museums of Asia, by and large, were established in a Western guise. Collections of works of art owned by local rulers, such as the rajas and sultans of India, were for private delectation. The reasons for the establishment of museums in the Western mode, by colonial governments for the most part, are various. On one level it was a mechanism to educate the populace, where, in principle at least, all people could enter and learn. It was also a place to collect, preserve and display the various treasures of each country, though obviously colonial powers removed many key pieces to their own museums in Europe. For others, these institutions would preserve examples of what the founders saw as disappearing cultures, as was the case in Australia. These were all reasons leading to the building and staffing of major institutions and physical structures throughout the region. Some museums of Asia, such as the National Museum of Indonesia, have long histories, it being founded in 1778, with its own impressive specific-purpose Greek-pillared building opened in 1867. Its site, overlooking the central square of Jakarta, speaks for its symbolic importance, at least at its founding.

This first wave of building mighty Græco-Italianate buildings occurred throughout Asia in the 19th century. The second wave of museum building occurred after World War II, when newly independent countries saw the possibilities for establishing their new visual symbols through such establishments. In India, the cultural institutions moved from colonial Calcutta to the new capital of Delhi. In the Philippines in the 1960s, first lady Imelda Marcos set up the Cultural Center of the Philippines as part of the desired internationalisation of the country, modelled on the Rockefeller Center in New York. The National History Museum of Laos has photos of the heroic Pathet Lao and the dastardly Americans. The South Korean Government quickly opened the new Museum of Contemporary Art on the outskirts of Seoul in time for the Olympic Games in 1988, a symbol of the emerging and internationally competitive country. New art museums have been

built throughout Japan and China in the past 10 years as symbols of the prosperity and cultural focus of these booming economies. Singapore also has spent a lot of money building museums in the past decade, seeing these institutions as giving weight to its desire to become a centre for cultural life in South-East Asia especially.

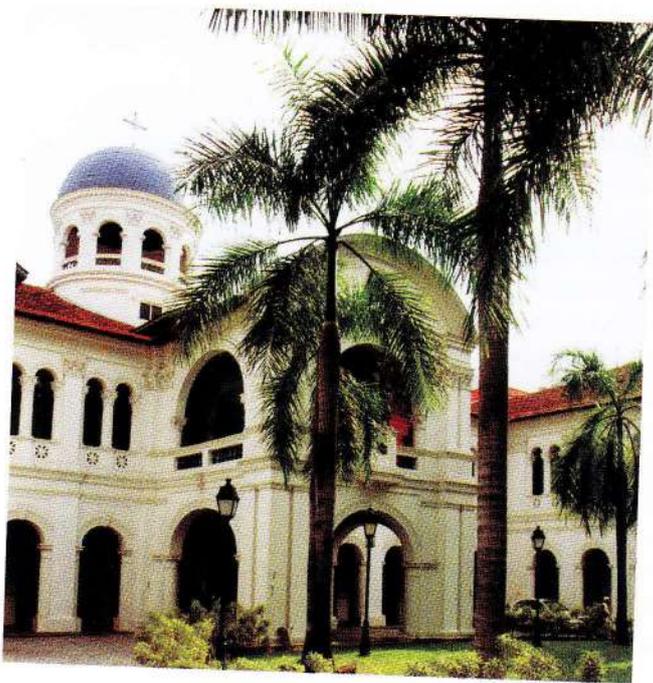
Ahmad Mashadi, Deputy Director of the Singapore Art Museum, acknowledged this in 1999 in Fukuoka:

The discourse [on Asian values] clues the shifts taking place in the way we create representations of ourselves. In manifesting such representations, the museum as a public institution is strategic apparatus.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, unlike the art schools, the majority of the museums have struggled to gain relevance, to find audiences and to establish themselves as key parts of local cultural life. For some, such as the prestigious National Museum of Indonesia, their situation has even deteriorated. In 2002, there were only 8059 foreign visitors compared with 29,169 in 1997, an important figure as foreign visitors are the main adult patrons of the institution.<sup>4</sup>

The issue is, of course, recognised in the region. Chief curator of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, Chung Joonmo, said in 1999:

Asia's art museums are not created because the general public earnestly feels that they are a really necessary part of their lives, they are created when a country reaches a certain wealth ... Consequently I feel that Asia's art museums are still at an elementary level. While this is the case, they must be on a par with art museums that have systems of a certain standard developed by Europe and so I think Asia's art museums are in a terribly harsh situation.<sup>5</sup>



Singapore Art Museum, Singapore. The museum is located in the old St Josephs Institution, a heritage building restored as the art museum. Original architect Father Charles Benedict Nain. Image courtesy Singapore Art Museum

Certainly, museums are audiences and programs and ex Mito in a small been a leading internationally, though it has recently with rec a fate also en major museums i as the Museum o and the Tokyo M of Photography.

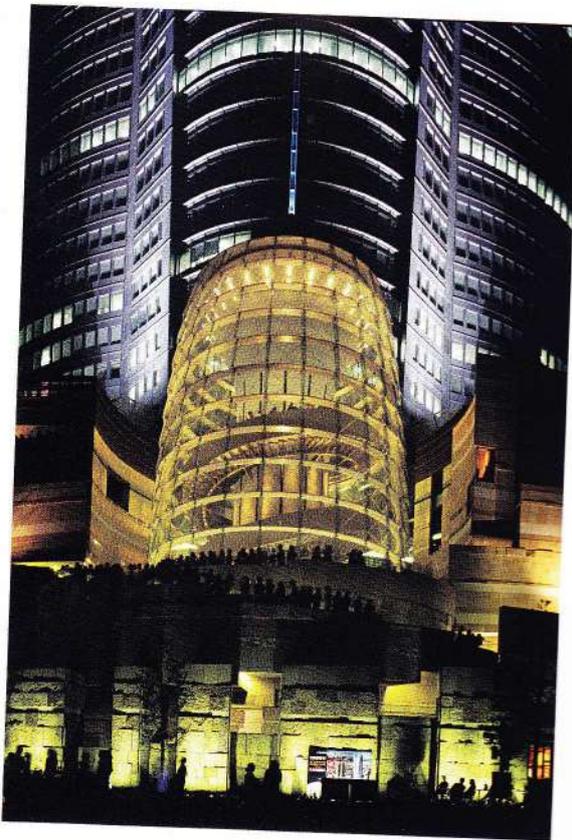
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Certainly, many of these new museums are engaging with their audiences and initiating innovative programs and exhibitions. Art Tower Naoto in a small town in Japan has been a leading institution, recognised internationally, in the past 10 years, though it has been struggling more recently with reduced budgets. This is a fate also encountered today by major museums in central Tokyo, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography.

This reduction in government funding for many of the innovative museums has left an overt gap for the private museums. In Tokyo again, the privately run Hara Museum has been a leader for many years, but the newly opened Mori Art Museum, founded by a wealthy property developer and placed in his newest complex in Roppongi as part of its amenity, is recognised as the leading art museum in Japan at the moment. Other art curators are looking to it for leadership.

The recent reduction of funds for the government-owned museums in Japan has led to a situation long understood in less wealthy countries of the region. And it has led to a similar building of privately run museums and art spaces, either by individual, often wealthy families or by groups of younger artists along NGO lines. In 2002, the Japan Foundation's Asia Center published a guide called *Alternatives: Contemporary Art Spaces in Asia*, listing 78 organisations throughout East and South-East Asia. It does include some major government-supported museums, such as the Singapore Art Museum, but the majority are private museums and NGOs. It has a qualitative side, which is not articulated, for, while the Singapore Art Museum is included, the National Gallery of Thailand is not, though two university galleries in Bangkok are, along with About Studio, Project 304, Tadu Contemporary Art



Mori Art Museum  
Tokyo, Japan  
2004  
Image courtesy  
Mori Art Museum  
Architect:  
Richard Gluckman

Space, and Si-Am art space. Many of these smaller galleries will no doubt have short life spans, but while the individuals running them are keen and committed they will add immeasurably to the vibrant art scene in Thailand. The same situation occurs in India where private commercial galleries can often be the main centres for dynamic activity, along with a small number of foundations, such as Sanskriti Kendra.

When Asialink was established in Australia in 1990, it was thought that our natural partners in Asia for hosting and sending art exhibitions would be the government-sector museums, which are the main partners here in Australia. But it has become increasingly apparent that the most effective partners to work with are those that are energised to think and act internationally, and while some are indeed from the government sector, increasingly, it is the private and NGO spaces to which we turn. Asialink's key partners in India are Sanskriti Kendra, a private foundation, and Khoj Workshops, an artist-run space; in Korea, we have happily worked with Art Sonje, a beautiful private museum in central Seoul with an active, internationalised program, and Ssamzie Art Space, a privately run organisation that houses artists' studios and a small gallery situated in one of the liveliest parts of the city. Throughout the region individuals are increasingly creating organisations that quickly gain recognition because they so clearly fill gaps left by other sectors. Everywhere individuals are the key to creating dynamic organisations, but it seems this is even more important in Asia.

In Hong Kong, Claire Hsu has established the Asia Art Archive to record the art activities that are so quickly flaring up around her and that, without other supportive infrastructure, can die leaving no trace.

There is a universal friction between the edifices built by governments, with a focus in recent years notably in Japan, China and Australia on new art museums, and the political will to provide enough funds and 'space' to make them work to their highest potential — whether it is time to train new staff, or to enable new major institutions to work through their priorities, or time to encourage audiences to try these new experiences. The Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne is a good example of this. An innovative idea, opened before it had time to settle into its rhythm, it has experienced staff and publicly aired planning problems ever since. But in Asia, with the special

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pressure noted by Chung Joonmo, these frictions are even more extreme. As he says, the expectation of museums quickly becoming important to their communities is unrealistic, and when this expectation is not met larger government support falls away. Unrealistic time limits and lack of experience of how long it takes to really make an institution gather speed and weather the various storms that will occur are very damaging.

The fast changes of economic circumstance in many countries of the region — the sheer rate of change — have made inherently conservative bureaucracies seem even slower to respond to the needs of an increasingly globalised arts fraternity. This applies to individual artists' support as well as to institutions. Artists in many countries do not even expect their governments to support them directly, again, in many cases because a trusted democratic process where politicians may be swayed by a critical and/or powerful arts lobby is either a very new concept or is just not envisaged in the foreseeable future. They do not express anger or surprise or vexation, as artists in Australia do, when the Government is seen to not support a good arts venture in the way they expect. The Australia Council for the Arts, the Australian Government's arts funding and advisory body, is well used to all sorts of criticism from the arts fraternity, but the Council only gets criticism because so much is expected of it. Its success is seen in how irrelevant everyone thinks it is. This is not the case, yet, in Asia, and maybe never will be, with the parallel track of private and individual support gaining more and more strength.<sup>6</sup>

I have written about three pillars of arts support in Asia: the art schools, the museums/galleries/art spaces and direct support — or lack of it — for artists. This is not the case where governments — national, prefectural, state and local — see the arts as providing international credibility and image building (leading to increased tourism, regional vitality, revenue — all reasonable outcomes, of course) through support of special events. And the queen of arts special events is a biennale or triennale, a multinational, branded and marketed product equal to the multinational, branded and marketed products of global capitalism. Governments around the world, including in the Asia-Pacific, have taken these events to their hearts, with India, Bangladesh and Sydney long established, and newer events now in Brisbane, Gwangju, Fukuoka, Taipei, Yokohama and Shanghai. Singapore, Hong Kong, Adelaide, Perth



11th Asian Art Biennale, Dhaka, Bangladesh 2004, Australian component curated by Alasdair Foster, organised by Asialink and the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney. Image courtesy Asialink. Photograph: Alasdair Foster

and Melbourne have included visual arts activities, usually as second-tier activities, within larger arts festivals. Interestingly, almost all of these events have been created separately from the main visual arts institutions — the state or national art museums — in each city, which can be seen variously as either a vote for independence or a vote to keep control.

The tri- or biennales even have their trans-national executive, travelling easily between brand outlets, pressured, well-recognised and owing only scant allegiance to a home country — the internationalised curator.<sup>7</sup> I have written before about this person.<sup>8</sup> Very often from America or Europe — though Nigerian-born Okwui Enwezor's of the 2002 Kassel *Documenta*, and Japanese Yuko Hasegawa's directorship of the 2001 Istanbul Biennale, overtly challenged this — these individuals initiate ideas, mount representation and offer opportunities that artists worldwide are happy to accept.

For artists in Asia, these events (and their directors) are viewed with muted enthusiasm. Certainly, such spending on the arts is positive; seeing work from elsewhere is positive; seeing ones

own work in recognition that artists, so if these are unive

Artists have international a various success. Luna have been Gold Prize at t Chinese have including at the of their govern and very confi constituency in a challenges cent tradition, it cha (rarely, for exam great respect at h cultural context. connection, mak glory, just being by. This can work of the audience u how much backg For viewers in As practice of visiting so much about th often unexplained remains impenetr clearly acknowledged they will become the governments t provided enough 's same way as has ha

The arts sc energised and cross Asia are growing p growing. The ques activity go, followi understanding of th

own work in these contexts, by and large, is positive. There is recognition that this money is unlikely to be used more directly for artists, so if this is one option, it is better than nothing. Again, these are universal discussions for artists.

Artists have been dealing with the desire to be part of the international art scene for years through such major events, with various success. From the 19th century, artists such as Filipino Juan Luna have been successful in Europe (he, for example, winning the Gold Prize at the 1884 Salon in Madrid). In recent decades the Chinese have made a major impact in America and Europe, including at the Venice Biennale, in spite of the lack of support of their government. They have been very focused and strategic, and very confident about their capacity. But, for the broader constituency in Asia, this biennale network has special challenges. It challenges central tenets of 'Asian' culture. It does not respect tradition, it challenges the status quo and accepted hierarchies (rarely, for example, selecting older established artists, who are given great respect at home), and the selections are usually without clear cultural context. Artists are placed next to others with no cultural connection, making individuals vie for their moment of — not even glory, just being remembered 10 minutes after the viewer has passed by. This can work better for Western artists in the West because most of the audience understands the context, but for artists from Asia, how much background and need for understanding is just ignored? For viewers in Asia less used to seeing contemporary art because the practice of visiting museums is less established, and also not knowing so much about the art of even their neighbours, this context-less, often unexplained, often very sophisticated and complex work also remains impenetrable. And, unless the Asia-Pacific events lead to clearly acknowledged new trends or show work not seen elsewhere, they will become pale imitations of what goes on elsewhere. (And the governments that pay for them will again turn away not having provided enough 'space' for them to find their own strengths, in the same way as has happened in many museums.)

The arts scene in Asia today is more complex, vibrant, energised and cross-cultural than ever before. The networks across Asia are growing palpably; networks between Asia and Europe are growing. The question is in which direction will support for this activity go, following this energy with a longer-term, sophisticated understanding of the current situation globally — or not?



The Leeum Samsung Museum of Art is the newest art museum. Opening October 2004  
Architects: Mario Botta (museum 1), Jean Nouvel (museum 2) and Rem Koolhaas (Child education and Culture Center 3)  
Image shows 3, 1 and 2 (left to right)

A final comment on circumstance. In the past 10 years, the rest of the world has been on a roller-coaster ride of interest and disinterest in the arts of Asia. In the early 1990s, with the booming 'tiger' economies, the strength of Japan, and the growth of wealth in China, the rest of the world, including the United States, Europe and Australia, refocused its gaze on this region. Arts bureaucracies followed, and increasing support was offered for curatorial, artistic, exhibition, teaching, publishing and other events that engaged more closely with Asia. All was looking positive for increased engagement on most fronts. Then the 1997 economic crash occurred, and almost everything stopped, affecting not only commerce, but also the surge of interest in Asia more broadly. And, as the economic situation improved, other calamities happened, including SARS and global terrorism, which dampened general confidence in exploring unknown cultures. We are still in choppy waters for engagement. The natural surge of energy of artists and many organisations pushes ahead, but cautiously, and new problems will only further damage confidence. We all plan for the future, but aware of a more difficult environment than we have encountered previously.



#### NOTES

- 1 Salima Hashmi, Pakistan, Lahore,
- 2 Jeffrey Hantover, contemporary art, Kong, 1991.
- 3 Ahmad Mashad, Fukuoka Asian A
- 4 Sari P. Setiogi, Jakarta Post, 19 M
- 5 Chung Joonmo, Century, 1999, p.
- 6 Some governmen
- 7 Taiwan and Sing
- 8 John Wiseman, in Cambridge Univ distinction betw incidental, and m still regard the b examples of the director) is an exa
- 8 Alison Carroll, Contemporary Ar
- Rhana Devenport



Artsonje Centre,  
Seoul, 2004  
Architect: Jong-Sung Kim  
Photograph:  
Artsonje Centre

#### NOTES

1. Salima Hashmi, 'Framing the present', in *50 Years of Visual Arts in Pakistan*, Lahore, 1997, p. 10.
2. Jeffrey Hantover, 'Contemporary Vietnamese painting', in *Uncorked Soul: contemporary art from Vietnam*, Plum Blossoms (International), Hong Kong, 1991.
3. Ahmad Mashadi, 'Report', in *Asian Art — Towards the 21st Century*, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, 1999, p. 83.
4. Sari P. Setiogi, 'Museum visitors display penchant for "breasts"', *The Jakarta Post*, 19 March, 2003.
5. Chung Joonmo, 'Question and answer', In *Asian Art — Towards the 21st Century*, 1999, p. 87.
6. Some governments, including those in Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan and Singapore, do provide grants to individual artists, but artists from these countries talk of the difficulties of accessing them.
7. John Wiseman, in *Global Nation? Australia and the politics of globalization*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 34–35, notes the distinction between transnational companies where headquarters are incidental, and multinational companies that are global in outlook but still regard the home market as crucial. The tri- and biennales are examples of the latter, but perhaps the executive (the curator/artistic director) is an example of the former.
8. Alison Carroll, 'Networks', in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner and Rhiana Devenport), Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996, pp. 30–31.