

Report on the International Conference: *Our Modernities: Positioning Asian Art Now*
 Organized by the Asia Research Institute & Department of History, National University of Singapore, 19-22 February 2004 at the Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore.
 Also supported by the Singapore Art Museum and the Contemporary Asian Arts Centre, La Salle-SIA.

By John Clark, University of Sydney

This conference was organized in six sessions and brought together art historians curators, and critics from, or working on, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Asia-Pacific. Several speakers also came from Europe and North America. It deliberately encompassed a broad range of methodologies ranging from art history and theory through anthropology to cultural studies. Furthermore presenters were given adequate time to present their papers and answer questions, and each section included a plenary session. Equality was maintained between presenters of different professional status, and there were intentionally no keynote speakers.

The overall aim was to see if there were new ways of understanding modernities in Asian art as parallel but contiguous discourses across the region, without privileging one art culture as a model, or thinking of modernity in art as a singular phenomenon drawn from Euramerican precursors. It was proposed that these modernities had elements in common to be discovered and which their supporting cultures had a common interest in foregrounding. Their positioning was to be in relation to disparate and non-Euramerican histories: the contemporary was emplaced in the historical.

The first session examined the intersection of cultures where Robert Jahnke positioned tribal art in its incorporation into the contemporary in New Zealand, Salima Hashmi discussed the re-imbriication of the miniature tradition within genealogies of the new in Pakistan, and Werner Kraus presented new material towards re-interpreting 'The Arrest of Diponagara' by the 19th century Indonesian painter Raden Saleh. Bilinda Nandadeva examined 'other-ness' or being neo-colonial in post-independence Sri Lankan painting, and Yashodhara Dalmia looked at appropriating the popular in recent Indian art. This section was haunted by the notion of 'tradition' in a complementary defining pair with 'modernity', and indicated ways of re-situating concerns with the culturally authentic or the essential, despite the role of gender in reconfiguring the 'tradition' being somewhat overlooked.

The second session dealt with the dynamics of location in the legitimizing of contemporary practice where Kao Yi-li repositioned the work of Liu Kuo-sung in Taiwan, Zhou Yan analysed Gu Wenda's art of written language in China and outside, and Michelle Antoinette more abstractly looked at shifting cartographies of identification in Southeast Asian art. This section was something of a loop between the first and third sections, and also a methodological bridge between conventional art history and cultural studies' analysis.

The third session examined structures of mediation and particularly the role of curators. Larissa Hjorth looked at cases studies of exchange and their characteristic modes of communication between Asia and Australia, Francis Marravillas gave an external

analysis of the curatorial imaginary at work in curating the Asia-Pacific Biennale, and Caroline Turner examined the curatorial intentions of the latter in comparison with those of the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale. Huynh Boi Tran examined the relative paucity of curatorship in Vietnam and the issue of government monopoly in fine arts, and Martina Köppel-Yang examined various recent Chinese overseas exhibitions of contemporary art and their increasing official support [her paper was read for her]. Curators and curating were examined as foundational agencies of mediation and in addition to questions of who or what enables curating the session implicitly raised the issue of who appoints the curator or gate-keeper. It is also more problematic to see curating in terms of social practice and its historical setting. The biography of the curator should be more subject to research and care should be taken about applying concepts such as 'independent curator' in Asian contexts where it has little meaning.

The fourth session examined how art works have been received in different Asian contexts. Kevin Chua re-assessed the Nanyang school's public in Singapore, Patrick Flores, analysed the public controversy surrounding the repatriation by purchase of Juan Luna's 'Parisian Life' and its generation of a discourse on what is the proper use of public property in the Philippines. Peter Schoppert looked at the admonitory role of public sculpture in Singapore by an analysis of its placement and inscriptions, and Omuka Toshiharu examined the emergence of a mass audience for a modern art in early twentieth century Japan. Examination of reception is relatively new in art history and this was the most tightly coherent section. It adequately foregrounded the forms and dynamics of reception and how important it is to understand modern art in different Asian contexts in terms of the constitution of the audience.

The fifth session looked at practices and their constraints with an examination of action and display in Chinese performance art with some reference to Indonesia, an inquiry into the relationship between everyday life and contemporary Chinese imaginaries of the modern. Pandit Chanrochanakit examined the transversal art projects of the Thai visual artists Navin Rawanchaikul, and Kim Youngna looked at the interactions between the modern Korean traditions of monochrome painting and *minjung* art. This session implicitly raised the issue of how far the international positioning of Chinese contemporary art could or should be a model for other Asian art practices which might be differently constituted by a different mobilizations of the local or the national. The Chinese position was also specific in that the question of a return to the resource of socialist materials or thematics was an issue with which much contemporary practice was now engaged.

The sixth session employed a number of different cultural studies, ethnographic and visual geographic approaches. Ray Langenbach demonstrated the close correlation between socialist realism and the practices of the performing state in Singapore, Zhang Zhaohui showed how a changed urban context had changed the way some Chinese artists both physically positioned and set conditions for the interpretation of their work, and Penny Edwards articulated the way in which certain monuments to the Pol Pot years in Cambodia had been landscaped to obscure their meaning. Ingrid Muan carefully described and problematized the production and reception of shop and street signage in

Pnom Penh, and Lisa Drummond showed how a nostalgic yearning for the pre-War or Pre-liberation architecture of Hanoi was expressed in certain pictorial motifs. This session showed how various kinds of ethnography could contribute to formal art historical analysis or cultural studies approaches.

The unspoken theme of the conference which emerged in many papers was the problematics of alternative modernities, and that these could only be conceptualized by a situation within the penumbra of whatever was constructed as tradition by a particular art culture..

The conference was very well attended with about 100 participants over four days including those from the art and curatorial worlds of Malaysia and Singapore as well as Hong Kong, Germany, and China.

The complete papers will be available at the end of March via the Asia Research Institute website of www.ari.nus.edu.sg and it is hoped that a selection may be published later by Singapore University Press.

The convenors were in order of session, Yashodhara Dalmia, Ahmad Mashadi, John Clark, Lee Weng Choy, Pi Li, and Ashley Carruthers.

This brief notice benefits from the observations of Patrick Flores, Maurizio Peleggi, and T.K. Sabapathy. John Clark is a Professor of Art History at the University of Sydney and was Chair of the Convenors for this conference.