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ASIAN INFLUENCE ON CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE UNITED STATES

~~Even the main chair meet, off record, off record, off record~~

by Kim Levin

NOTE 2 : I MAY NOT
EXACTLY FOLLOW
THE PRINTED TEXT
BUT I WILL SPEAK
CLEARLY -

First, I'd like to tell you that my talk will have less to do with performance than with behavior, less to do with gesture than with attitude, and less to do with specific Asian influence than with general western presumptions and distortions.

Second, I'd like to tell you why. ~~I thought I would discuss~~ ^{considered, discussing} Asian influences on art in the United States, to counter some prevailing notions of western influence on contemporary Asian art that have accumulated over the years. But I decided not to. So if you're expecting me to ~~analyze~~ ^{analyze} the influence of Chinese calligraphy and zen philosophy on Abstract

Expressionist gestural painting, or the influence of Buddhist thought on John Cage's ideas, I hope you won't be disappointed. I decided not to for three reasons. One is that I hope, at this late date, ^{that} it will suffice if I simply remind you of the ^{of this influence,} fact, and ask you to ponder the pervasiveness of ^{Asian} ~~these~~ influences and their dissemination into contemporary American

art. It's not possible, in the limited scope of one lecture, to attempt a revisionist rewrite of western art history. Nor would it be sufficient:

the focus would remain as usual on western art, and what the west has ^{, what Asia has contributed to western culture.} taken from elsewhere. Another reason I decided not to is that I came

across an old essay I had written, which reminded me once again about the role that cross-cultural misunderstanding plays in art ^{is} history, but I'll

get to that in a minute. And the third reason is that ~~after I agreed to~~ ^{at} ~~speaking at this conference but~~ before I began to prepare my text, an excellent

attempt to redress the balance and address complex questions about the direction of influence and mutual interaction was published. I refer to

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he catalogue for the exhibition of postwar Japanese art, *Scream Against the Sky*, which contains detailed analyses, by Alexandra Munroe, Taro ^{mutual}mano, and others, of the interrelationships between Japanese and western art in the 20th century.

While thinking about the subject I suddenly remembered that at the college I went to, there was a professor in the art department who painted Chinese-style landscapes on scrolls. He was a large earnest man with red hair and freckles, who came from the midwest, which is known as the heartland of America. I confess that I haven't the vaguest idea why he was painting Chinese scrolls, but being a pragmatic American, he was convinced that he had invented a way to improve things. He had devised a sort of wooden box to house his scrolls--a piece of carpentry like something Rube Goldberg or Buster Keaton might have concocted. It had a rectangular opening and a knob or maybe two knobs, and when you wound the knob the scroll would unroll horizontally so you would have a moving picture, with just a small part being displayed in the opening, as if on a television screen. And so he could paint extremely long scrolls and you could unwind them for a very long time. And I assure you he did this with absolutely no irony and no embarrassment, and no sense of the kitsch or absurdity that John Kessler would later bring to his kinetic work about Asia.

To get back to the old essay I mentioned ~~few minutes ago~~: In the late '70s I had written this short essay for *Arts Magazine*, provoked by a modest exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art of works by 40 Los Angeles artists. In the essay I concluded that California art needed reevaluating, that it was not just a regional aberration of the prevailing New York style or a provincial interpretation but an alternate tradition, a tradition not only of calligraphic gestures like those of ~~Bradley Walker~~ ^{of Mark Tobey}

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~~San Francisco~~ or San Francis, but also zen-like gestures such as John
 Baldessari's, a tradition of fantasies of oriental serenity and formalized
 light and space as in the installations of artists like Robert Irwin or
 Michael Asher. A tradition of cryptic narrative that ~~has~~ had as much to do
 with fantasies of Asian storytelling as with Hollywood, ~~giving rise to~~ as in the
 narrative works ~~such as~~ ^{of} Allen Ruppersberg ⁸ or Alexis Smith ³. And a
 tradition of panoramic landscape visions in which nature is a vast expanse
 and human events are almost imperceptible, such as the pebble drawings of
 Mija Celmins or the land projects of Helen and Newton Harrison. I also
 noted in that essay that under other circumstances, Chris Burden might
 well have been a Buddhist monk. I concluded that there was a California
 tradition that had long looked to Asia the way art in New York had looked
 to Europe. This tradition, I might add, existed even before the days of
 Mark Tobey ~~OR MORRIS GRAVES.~~ ^{OR MORRIS GRAVES.} After all, Graumann's Chinese Theater--with
 its pavement of footprints, or is it handprints, of the movie stars, has
 long been the symbolic shrine of Hollywood. (x)

I'll just read you the first paragraph of that old essay. "There
 is a story told in California about Robert Irwin, which may or may not be
 apocryphal. It seems he always imagined that Japan was the ideal place; he
 finally went to Japan and was, of course, disappointed. Later, back in
 California, driving on the freeway with a "chili dog" in one hand and a
 Coors (beer) in the other, he suddenly had his revelation: California is
 my Japan."

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I want to read you something else, something ~~from~~ ^{Tokyo} museum
 director Chisaburoh Yamada said in the early '70s: "Westerners may
 flatter themselves, believing that they now qualify for... dialogue. For
 example, they may think their modern art has received immeasurable

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influence from Zen Buddhism and so on. From our point of view, what they are talking about is certainly, in most cases, a soi-disent zen, little resembling the teachings of orthodox Zen Buddhism."

And I want to remind you that if anyone wishes to trace Asian influence in art in the United States all the way back to its origins-- beyond Robert Irwin, beyond Sam Francis and Mark Tobey, beyond Graumann's Chinese Theater, beyond John Cage and Frank Lloyd Wright, in fact beyond art, architecture, and celebrityhood, and beyond misunderstood esoteric philosophies and exotic kitsch, they ^{might} ~~will~~ find themselves staring ~~straight~~ into the face of economic exploitation: ~~straight~~ at the miserable living conditions of Asian immigrants in America ~~a century ago~~, that is, if they can see past the surface details of ~~American~~ ^{the} Chinatowns, which are still considered picturesque. ~~In New York, Asian influence was also partly handed down secondhand from European artists.~~ ^{they might find that} ~~But the fantasies of Asia~~ ^{had something to do not only with an} ~~in the western United States~~ ^{20th century taste for exotic} ~~certainly originated in some~~ ^{ornament, but with} ~~parts from the presence of the Chinese laborers who built the railroads~~ ^{and imported styles,} that connected the far west with the rest of the United States.

This, while it may seem to veer far afield from the subject of contemporary art, goes right to the central issue when we talk about the influence of one culture on another, or even the influence of a specific artist or motif or idea ~~from one culture on another~~: at the core of cross-cultural appropriation you will almost always find ignorance, misunderstanding, and fantasy, in varying degrees, if not outright exploitation. Western fantasies of Asia originated in a weird 19th and 20th century gap between the esthetic and the social. In that gap has accumulated huge amounts of self-delusion and fantasy.

Now, as Chisaburoh Yamada pointed out, fantasy is not the same as

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dialogue. Fantasy, by definition, has little to do with actuality. When he spoke of a soi-disant zen, he was speaking of the distance between eastern actualities and western fantasies.

That distance remains vast, whether it's in the work of ~~an unknown~~ ~~idwestern-art-teacher~~ ^{NOTE} a couple of generations of California artists, or in the work of a famous French theorist. In Roland Barthes' "Empire of Signs" we can find a more elevated, theoretical, and self-conscious version of basically the same thing. Listen to Barthes: **QUOTE:**

"If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object, create a new arabagone, so as to compromise no real country by my fantasy. I can also--though in no way claiming to represent or to analyse reality itself (these being the major gestures of western discourse)--isolate somewhere in the world (faraway) a certain number of features..." **He continues:**

"Hence, Orient and Occident cannot be taken here as realities to be compared and contrasted historically, philosophically, culturally, politically..."

"I am not lovingly gazing toward an oriental essence--to me the Orient is a matter of indifference, merely providing a reserve of features whose manipulation--whose invented interplay--allows me to entertain the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own." Now in Barthes's defense I will say that this was written 20 years ago!!!, but still, I find it a rather extraordinary feat of Cartesian logic that by providing these disclaimers, he seems to have felt he gave himself permission to compromise a real country, Japan.

For some of you, what I am saying is basic and assumed, but please bear with me. Because despite all the new awareness fostered by postmodern

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theory and multiculturalist studies, the old modern and western and colonial presumptions still persist. There is still the widespread belief in the western artworld that the flow of influence is a one way street *going out*. There is still the lingering assumption that everything emanates from the supposedly advanced western centers to the supposedly derivative (and supposedly grateful but sometimes inexplicably resentful) peripheries.

In New York at least, it's still generally believed that anything ~~that~~ *artwork* that looks familiar must be derivative. It's ^{also} an unconscious reflex in the west to think that everything is still ours for the taking, and that, moreover, we're doing you a favor if we take it. The idea still lurks that appropriations and misappropriations from non-Western cultures somehow benefit the latter rather than exploit the so-called Other. And even now that the discussion has been updated to postmodern (or should I say postcolonial?) terms of the capital S Self and the capital O Other, ^{the discourse} ~~it~~ still rests on unexamined assumptions: ^{for example,} the unexamined assumption that this thoroughly *analysed*, ~~examined~~ ^{and} thoroughly deconstructed, Self is white, western, and basically *endowed* ~~with~~ ^{by which} ~~privilege & power~~; masculine; and that the Other, which of course is none of those, exists mostly to reify and validate this self-reflexive Self.

~~(Add quote: Thomas McEvilley?)~~

It is necessary to ask, as some critics have been doing recently, and to keep asking: Who takes what from whom, and why? Who is doing the giving? Who is doing the taking? And who is getting the credit? Is it a matter of delusion or dialogue? And as art critics and historians, we had better remember scholarly procedure. Before we decide whether to call a resemblance either homage, or exploitation, (or *revenge*), we'd better make sure that what we're seeing is actually influence, and not some quirk of chance affinity. Not some Zeitgeisty thing that happened by chance to be

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n the air at the same time in different parts of the world. Not some pure coincidence. And if actual influence can be detected, then we'd better double check the chronology to make sure in which direction the influence flowed.

There's not much point at this late date of dredging up the old imperialist and eurocentric myths or the long history of exoticizing fantasies about Asia, except to point out that the history of various orientalisms imported into western art is laced throughout the entire history of western art. It has been happening ever since artists in ancient Egypt borrowed Assyrian and Phoenician motifs, and ever since archaic Greek sculptors borrowed smile, ~~via~~ stance, and canon of proportions from 25th and 26th dynasty Egypt. Ever since medieval monks took a look at Persian miniatures. Ever since the days of the Dutch traders. Ever since Napoleon. And let's remember, it is not exactly a coincidence that in the mid 19th century, at exactly the moment Japan and its esthetic were revealed to the West, the French avantgarde happened to emerge.

Exoticizing fantasies of Asia continue into postmodern art and theory. Among them must be included Barthes' "Empire of Signs," ~~in which~~ ^{is} an imagined Japan (he had never been there) serves as the imaginary site of all the usual stereotypes. ~~and~~ ^{Also} Jon Kessler's ^{Kinetic} lightbox sculptures (such as The Art of Tea) which also play ambiguously with western fantasies of an imagined Asia; as well as Julian Schnabel's over-paintings on kabuki stage-sets and a lot else. We may be spared the tainted benevolence of the paternalistic early 20th century, a time when a European shipping company could proudly advertise itself with a series of postcards featuring images of people from exotic faraway lands, and each postcard had a printed

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As with DNA, an exact transcription produces a clone. If there is a ~~mis~~ genetic mistranscription, or mistranslation, a mutation is created. This is the basis for evolution in biology. Culture too is a living organism. Art has always depended on creative misunderstanding.

in the US we say "Asian" instead of "the Orient",
but we've still lumping together a
variety of nations and cultures without
any differentiation -

caption praising the industriousness of the noble natives. In its time, this was considered politically correct.

We need to pay more attention to the terminology. The terminology of today is tainted with different distortions. I recently read ~~somewhere~~ that Brice Marden's recent paintings were, as the reviewer termed it, "Chinese-calligraphy inspired." When a western artist poaches from another culture, it is normally said to be "inspired by." However, when a non-Western artist does the same thing, it is normally said to be "influenced by," "derived from," or "derivative." I read somewhere recently another piece of art criticism that spoke ~~of~~ --and I quote-- of "incorrectly received" western models. I prefer to speak of creative misunderstanding. As in, for example, the way the Impressionists creatively misunderstood Japanese prints, or the way Picasso creatively misunderstood African sculpture. Actually, the truth is also that the Impressionists and Picasso incorrectly received Asian and African models. Just as the Abstract Expressionists incorrectly received not only European abstraction and Surrealism, but Asian calligraphy and philosophy. Is this any different from the way the Gutai artists creatively misunderstood abstract Expressionism? It isn't. The history of art can be read as a history of cross-cultural creative misunderstandings leading to new developments. ~~Art has always depended on creative misunderstanding.~~

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~~But~~ The presumptions in all their guises are so entrenched that they bear refuting once again. Instead of pointing out, for example, that John Cage studied with D.T. Suzuki, it's more likely to be noticed, in the west at least, that Cage's music had an influence on Japanese art in the 1950s. Instead of saying that Nam June Paik, the father of video art, is a Korean artist, it has been more convenient to consider him an honorary westerner,

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claimed by both Germany and America. But as I said earlier, it is no longer sufficient ^{in the West} ~~on the West~~ to merely correct past assumptions by reversing the balance of credit or the direction of presumed influence. And it is no longer sufficient in Asia to reject so-called western models in favor of some alternate fantasy of folkloric ethnicity. It is necessary to consider who has written the history, for whom, and why. But it is also necessary to realize that different parts of Asia ~~each~~ have their own ^{individual} distinct forms of modernity and post or hyper-modernity, and that ^{democracy &} modernity is ^{Not} ~~no longer~~ always synonymous with the word western. ^{Or with the word} ~~It's not~~ ~~easy to sort out what has been taken or given and when.~~ It may be difficult to recognize that sometimes what we see isn't influence but simultaneous coincidence. ^{That sometimes things with superficial resemblances are} ~~It's even more difficult to realize that by now~~ ^{profoundly different.} the intertwinings of mutual influence are so tangled they're nearly impossible to unknot.

The exhibition of Japanese art, *Scream Against the Sky*, may ~~not~~ have been ^{controversial} ~~a surprise~~ ^{because it excluded some establishment artists,} ~~but~~ In New York, the show and the dates on ^{some major} the labels offered revelations. In Japan, the Zero society and Gutai artists of the early and mid '50s were painting with watering cans, explosives, remote control toys, vibrators, and their own bodies. They were using smoke machines, water, electric bulbs, polyurethane, mud, nails, tires, and dead animals. They were doing actions which we now would call Happenings. And they were doing ~~all~~ these things ^{several} ~~some~~ years before Allen Kaprow's famous essay and before Claus Oldenburg's famous manifesto, both of which called for an art of dirty socks, old tires, smoke, and all the ordinary ^{objects} ~~things~~ of everyday life. And before Yves Klein's body-print paintings ~~of 1959~~, or ~~his~~ smoke paintings. And probably before ~~Kauschenberg~~.

^{only} We are beginning to realize that ^(MORE) during the past century, modernism has represented several different ~~ways~~ of social order, forms

In the late 1950s, when critics in the West belatedly began to find out about postwar Japanese art, the site-specific work, action events, radical objects, paintings, and performances were said to have affinities with Abstract Expressionism, Cobra, and Art Informel. Alexandra Munroe has now described the ^{and} performance-related art in Japan between 1951 and 1957, using any means and any materials, as "the most advanced in the history of avantgarde performance." But for decades it was misunderstood as derivative. As Munroe ^{has} pointed out, Gutai was received (in Paris) as Japanese art Informel; ~~while~~ in New York it was called Japanese Abstract Expressionism. Dore Ashton dismissed it as, quote, "all too familiar to New Yorkers." It wasn't even taken seriously in Japan.

No one seems to have taken notice of the chronology. ~~Even Munroe~~ ~~peaks of Japanese modern art as being nearly contemporaneous with the~~ ~~best I would go further.~~ ^{Shozo} Shimamoto did hole works in 1950. ^{Toshio} Yoshida was using nails and rope in 1953. ^{or 54} Zero Society artists had realized the conceptual value of blank canvas ^{before} 1955. ^{Arsuko} Tanaka's Electric Dress of 1954 not only preceded Rauschenberg's use of light bulbs and Flavin's early use of incandescent bulbs, but was more extreme. ^{Saburo} Murakami's box with a ticking clock inside was created in 1956, several years before Robert Morris's ^{similar} box with the sound of its own making. ^{Akira} Kanayama's 1957 "Work," an automatic self-painting device (that made a pseudo-Pollock on vinyl) was contemporaneous if not earlier than Tinguely's self-painting machines. Yayoi Kusama's use of mirror as infinite repetition preceded Lucas Samaras's ^{Mirror} Rooms. Though Michael Kirby, and later Karpow, did very briefly acknowledge the Gutai group as being a forerunner ~~and/or~~ ^{art} having some influence on the origins of Happenings, Gutai ~~has continued to be~~ ^{was} generally unacknowledged or ignored in the United States. ~~or else~~

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~~considered an offshoot~~. This situation may have had something to do with the Greenbergian and Minimalist prejudice against theatricality in art. Of course no one could have foreseen ~~at the time~~, but in hindsight, we can at the very least acknowledge the Gutai artists as important precursors not only of Happenings but of Conceptual art, post-Minimalist process and anti-form work, Arte Povera, earthworks, and body art.

Similar misunderstandings and silence greeted the Mono-Ha movement a decade later. Mono-ha was not merely an Asian version of post-Minimalist process art, which it can resemble superficially. ^{It} ~~but~~ derives from very different and traditional Asian sources, as well as an attempt to deconstruct western modernism. The Mono-Ha artists were, to quote Munroe, "working at the international forefront of post-Minimalist experimentation--only from a radically different cultural perspective."

And speaking of conveniently adopting internationally known artists such as Nam June Paik, ^{this is a widespread dilemma recently} ~~I'm not sure whether to criticize the Japanese artworld~~ in Munroe here: I was surprised to see that *Scream Against the Sky* ^{called} ~~included~~ Lee U-Fan, the theorist of Mono-Ha, ~~as~~ a Japanese artist, ~~acknowledged only in passing as "Korean-born"~~. He may live in Kamakura, Japan, but he is a Korean ~~artist~~. Is it not possible to acknowledge the full complexity of the fact that a Korean artist is responsible for originating a Japanese art movement?

And let's not forget the Asian contribution to Fluxus. ~~As both Munroe and Nam June Paik remark in the catalogue of Scream Against the Sky~~ Japanese artists not only played an originating and central role in the early days of the Fluxus movement in the early '60s, but ^{Tatsumi} ~~but~~ HiJikata and ~~Hi Red Center did independent work that paralleled Fluxus. And HiJikata, I believe, smothered a chicken in a performance before Rafael Ortiz killed a~~

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~~chicken at Judson Church, though I'm not sure if this should be considered~~
~~a historical honor~~. To ask another awkward question: has anyone ever
 considered the influence of the ^{Japanese} ~~Fluxus~~ Fluxus artists, and their musical
 events and scribbled scores, on Joseph Beuys?

As for misunderstandings within Asia itself, it is sometimes said by
 Japanese critics that the difference between modernism in the West and
 modernism in Japan, which started with the Meiji ^{restoration} ~~revolution~~, is that in
 Japan modernism involved, besides westernization, an anti-modern return to
 nativist origins. I'd like to point out that I do not consider this return
 to origins to be ~~ambiguous~~ contradictory, or anti-modern: modernism in
 the west also involved a search for origins and primitive energies. The
 search for origins is profoundly modern. For me, it is the aspect of
 simulation in Asian modernism that is most contradictory, anti-modern, and
 perhaps ~~even~~ predictive of postmodern practice. Shinohara's "Imitation
 art" series of 1963-64--copies of Johns, Rauschenberg, ^{and Pop artists--} ~~etcetera~~--was
 contemporaneous if not earlier than Elaine Sturtevant's similar work.

AT As the specifics of cultural content and the conditionalities of
 social context have replaced the absolutes of abstract ideologies and
 abstract forms--both in the world of contemporary art and in the world at
 large, many so-called historical truths are no longer as clear and
 monolithic as was once believed. Post-totalitarian, postcolonial, and
 postmodern art have intersected at unexpected angles. At these
 intersections it's no longer always possible to make distinctions between
 what is mine and what is yours, or to revert to folkloric fantasies. ~~NO CHECK~~
~~spelling? AG~~ The interrelationships between cultures have become
 increasingly complex. It is now necessary to consider where the components
 came from, when and why, whether they have been imposed or borrowed

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willingly, how they have been subverted and transformed, and whether or not resemblances involve influence or affinity. While theorists in the West have been updating old romanticizations of exotic cultures, postmodernizing the old notions with a new terminology of Self and Other, artists and critics in former so-called peripheries that were formerly out-of-bounds have begun to focus on their own issues and their own empowerment. They have the advantage of knowing more about our art history than we in the West generally do about theirs. And the advantage of a more sophisticated awareness of the socio-esthetic implications and compositions. We in the West may well wake up one day to find that our own art has become irrelevant.

We have already realized that the shift of paradigm, embraced so eagerly by theoreticians in the 1970s, is fraught with confusions and dangers. There is just as much imperfect and simplistic art as there ever was on the modern side of the great divide. Postmodern issues of decentralization and ethnic identity that seemed therapeutic in the world of art have proven deadly in the real world. Developments that appeared entirely benign to early proponents of identity politics have, by now, in places such as the former Yugoslavia or Ruanda, revealed a tragic potential. And after the Oklahoma City bombings and the revelations of widespread white-supremacist state militias, even the ^{cohesion} ~~dissolution~~ of the United States no longer seems an absolute ^{certainly} ~~certainty~~.

In art, as in the world at large, the question is no longer whether what is happening is desirable. It is rather how to adapt to inevitable transitions and inexorable processes. Postmodernism, if we can still call it that, and I'm not sure we can, has obviously crossed the point of no return. As we move further into a decentralized intermediary period

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between eras, groping toward a new balance and a different paradigm, art can predict and express and try to make sense of the disruptions and changes and malaise. It can grapple with the realization that on both sides of the old Iron Curtain, both sides of the equator, and both sides of the planet, the history of our century's art, like the history of civilization, has contained huge amnesiac gaps as well as large portions of self-serving fiction. Or it can perpetuate the old mentality of colonizers and colonized while clinging to the disintegrating values of the past.

Huge questions have arisen that couldn't have been imagined a decade or two ago. Can independent art engage sociological issues without falling victim to the perils of ideological correctness? Can the increasingly global artworld--now that it has begun to realize that "universal" is little more than a modern code-word for a proselytizing Eurocentric myth--focus on the local and specific rather than the so-called universal verities without splintering into mini-monocultures? Can the new inclusiveness avoid slipping into new forms of exclusionary intolerance? Can it encompass a multitude of transnational and hyphenated artistic identities without descending to simplistic solutions and new stereotypes. And last but not least, can art ^{tolerate} ~~cross~~ cross-cultural misunderstandings?

[NOTE: SOME ADDITIONAL REMARKS WILL BE ADDED HERE]

➤ There has been talk in the past few months in Europe, or at least in Berlin, about The Marco Polo Syndrome; there was a symposium and a publication is planned. The term, the Marco Polo Syndrome, which was borrowed from an essay by Gerardo Mosquera, refers to the cross-cultural misunderstandings that ensue when an artist, critic, or curator from one culture attempts to interpret the art of another culture. It has become,

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at least in Germany, a term of condemnation, as in: an exhibition suffered from the Marco Polo Syndrome.

I believe that ~~it must be considered a given~~ Any effort to understand, explain, or assimilate into another culture is by necessity flawed. Cross-cultural distortions, omissions, exasperations, and disbelief are unavoidable. On the other hand, cross-cultural chronologies can wreak some necessary havoc with the standard western history of art.

But what exactly is this Marco Polo Syndrome? What is Marco Polo being blamed for? The American Heritage Dictionary is brief: "See Polo, Marco. 1254? - 1324? Venetian traveler to the court of Kublai Khan." An old Encyclopaedia Britannica (an educational device leftover from the days of the British empire?) tells a fuller, and probably sweetened, version of Marco Polo's tale. Little Marco's parents apparently took him as an infant to the Crimea, and from there they were brought to China by envoys of the court of Kublai Khan. It was the 13th century. They were the first Europeans the fabled ruler of the powerful Mongol empire had ever met. And so Marco Polo grew up in Asia, he learned to speak and write several Asian languages, he traveled throughout Asia as Kublai Khan's emissary and--except for a two-year interlude during his teenage years when he returned with his father to Venice--he remained in Asia until he was nearly 40 years old, when Kublai Khan sent him back to Venice with messages for the rulers of Europe.

Marco Polo's problems supposedly arose when he returned from the Mongol empire which then ruled a large part of the known world, to Europe, much of which was in the midst of what used to be known as The Dark Ages. And though he might have been responsible for the transformation of chow into pasta, Marco Polo was no imperialist colonizer: in fact, he may

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have been the first transcultural world citizen. The real problem, if we can believe the old Encyclopaedia, was that few people back in Venice were willing to believe his accounts of the achievements of these distant Asian cultures they were ignorant of. According to the encyclopaedia: "If these travels of his had been taken at their full value by the Middle Ages, the science of geography would have been very much advanced. But unfortunately they were looked upon by most people rather as fairy tales, though they had their influence, no doubt, in leading Columbus to seek this land of Cathay by sailing westward."

Well, I don't think we can blame Marco Polo for Columbus's errors, either navigational or sociopolitical. ~~And the Marco Polo Syndrome may well be inevitable.~~ Mediations between different cultures are destined to be plagued by distortion, ~~curiosity~~ exoticization, ignorance, partial knowledge, and imbalances of power. Misunderstandings must be assumed. But I want to say again that I'm a believer in the value of creative misunderstanding. However flawed, creative misunderstandings provoke developments in art. When Surrealism and Abstraction from Europe and calligraphy from Asia fused in New York to ignite Abstract Expressionism, it was a case of creative misunderstanding. When Abstract Expressionism mutated in Japan into a conceptual and performative body art of extreme actions and events--several years before it mutated similarly in the United States--it was another case of creative misunderstanding. We could do worse than to suffer from the Marco Polo syndrome.

And despite the hazards of leftover hierarchies, we could do ~~far~~ worse than to interact--on equal footing--with cultures that we, particularly in the west, have long ignored and been ignorant of. But let's not impose arbitrary categories. Let's not lump chunks of the world

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together in new but equally inaccurate ways. Let's realize that it is still hard to distinguish between taking and giving, and between the craving for novelty and the ~~willingness to acknowledge~~ ^{realization} that innovative work ~~things have~~ ^{has} been happening elsewhere all along. Sometimes independently, sometimes differently, sometimes first. And let's admit that this is no longer a struggle between colonizers and colonized, or between dominant and imposed-upon cultures. The old tug-of-war between Europe and America, between North and South America, between East and West should be past history. Right now, at this transitional and decentralizing moment, we're all in the same boat together, ~~like it or not, witnessing and~~ buffeted by aspects of the same global process. ~~Of course~~ Cross-cultural misunderstandings are unavoidable. ~~But, as I suggested when asked to comment on the Marco Polo Syndrome discussion in Berlin:~~ Let's pause for a moment to consider the alternative ^{to the Marco Polo syndrome:} it's called isolationism.

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