DEAR MARIE-CLAUDE - THANK YOU FOR YOUR FAX & FOR TAKING CARE OF THE CHECQUE PROBLEM. I HAVE BEEN IN EUROPE SINCE I LAST FAXED YOU & HAVE JUST RETURNED. MY TEXT FOLLOWS. I HOPE IT IS NOT TOO LATE. PHYLLIS B. & I HAVE REPORTED ALREADY ON THE CONGRESS WE ARE NOW WRITING SOMETHING FOR THE NEWSLETTER - I LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING YOU FEB. 24. BEST REGARDS, KIM

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ASIAN INFLUENCE ON CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE UNITED STATES

By Kim Levin

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.

If you're expecting me to 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 several reasons. One is that I hope, at this late date, that it will suffice if I simply remind you of the fact of this influence, and ask you to ponder the pervasiveness of Asian 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 taken from elsewhere, what Asia has contributed to Western art history. 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's history, but I'll get to that in a minute. Also, 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 the catalogue for the exhibition of postwar Japanese art, Scream Against the Sky, which contains detailed analyses, by Alexandra Munroe, Taro Amano, and others, of the mutual interrelationships between Japanese and western art in the 20th

To get back to the old essay I mentioned: 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 abberation of the prevailing New York style or a provincial interpretation but an alternate tradition. A tradition not only of calligraphic gestures like those of Mark Tobey or Sam Francis, but also zen-like gestures such as John Baldessari's. A tradition of fantasies of oriental serenity and formalized space as in the installations of artists like Robert Irwin or Michael Asher. A tradition of cryptic narrative that had as much to do with fantasies of Asian storytelling as with Hollywood, giving rise to narrative works such as Allen Ruppersberg's or Alexis Smith's. And a tradition of panoramic landscape visions in which nature is a vast expanse and human events are almost imperceptible, as in the pebble drawings of Vija 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. 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.

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

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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.''

I want to read you something else, something 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 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 Case and Frank Lloyd Wright, in fact beyond art, architecture, and celebrityhood, and beyond misunderstood esoteric philosophies and exotic kitsch, they might find themselves staring into the face of economic exploitation: at the miserable living conditions of Asian immigrants in 19th and early 20th century America, that is, if they can see past the surface details of the American Chinatowns, still miserable and still considered picturesque. They might find that fantasies of Asia in the United States had something to do not only with an early 20th century taste for exotic ornament and imported styles, including Asian-influenced styles imported from Europe, but also with the presence of the Chinese laborers who built the railroads 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

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influence of one culture on another, or even the influence of a specific artist or motif or idea; 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 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 a couple of generations of California artists, or in the work of a famous French theorist: In Roland Barthes's ``Empire of Signs'' we can find a more elevated, theoretical, and self-conscious version of basically the same thing. Listen to Barthes:

``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 sarabasme, 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: ``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

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was written some 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 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 leading 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 any work of art 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 flatter 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 still rests on unexamined assumptions: for example, the unexamined assumption that this thoroughly analyzied and thoroughly deconstructed Self is white, western, and basically endowed with masculin privalege and power: and that the Other, which of course is none of those exists mostly to reify and validate this self-reflexive Self.

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

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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 resemblence 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 in 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, 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.'' His imagined Japan (he had never been there) serves as the imaginary site of all the usual stereotypes. Also Jon Kessler's kinetic lightbox sculptures (such as The Art of Tea) which also play ambiguously with western

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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 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. In the U.S. we say Asian instead of Oriental, but we're still lumping together a variety of nations and cultures without any differentiation. I recently read 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--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 than 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.

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

But the presumptions in all their guises are so entrenched that
ey bear refuting once again. Instead of pointing out, for example, that
hn Cage studied with D.T. Suzuki, it's more likely to be noticed, in the
st at least, that Cage's music had an influence on Japanese art in the
50s. Instead of saying that Nam June Paik, the father of video art, is a
orean artist, it has been more convenient to consider him an honorary
esterner, claimed by both Germany and America. But as I said earlier, it
s no longer sufficient in the West to merely correct past assumptions by
eversing the balance of credit or the direction of presumed influence.
nd it is no longer sufficient in Asia to reject so-called western models
n favor of some alternate fantasy of folkloric ethnicity. It is necessary
o consider who has written the history, for whom, and why. But it is also
ecessary to realize that different parts of Asia have their own distinct
orms of modernity and post or hyper-modernity, and that modernity is not
lways synonymous with the word western, or with the words democracy and
individualism. We are only beginning to realize that during the past
century, modernism has represented several different forms of social
order. It may also be difficult to recognize that sometimes what we see
isn't influence but simultaneous coincidence, and that sometimes whines
with superficial resemblences are profoundly different. It's even more
difficult to realize that by now the intertwinings of mutual influence are
so tangled they're nearly impossible to unknot.

The exhibition of Japanese art, Scream Against the Sky, may have

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been controversial in Yokohama because it excluded some establishment artists. In New York, the show and the dates on the labels offered major 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 these things several 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 of everyday life. And before Yves Klein's body-print paintings or smoke paintings. And probably before Rauschenberg.

In the late 1950s, when critics in the West belatedly began to find out about postwar Japanese art, the paintings and performances were said to have affinities with Abstract Expressionism, Cobra, and Art Informel. Alexandra Munroe has recently described the site-specific work, action events, radical objects, and performance-related art in Japan between 1951 and 1957, which used 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, in Paris Gutai was received as Japanese Art Informel; in New York it was called Japanese Abstract Expressionism. Dore Ashton dismissed it as ``all too familiar to New Yorkers.'' It wasn't even taken seriously in Japan.

No one seems to have taken notice of the chronology. 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 by 1955. Atsuko 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 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 Kaprow, did very briefly acknowledge the Gutai group as being a forerunner or having some influence on the origins of Happenings, Gutai art continued to be generally unacknowledged or ignored in the United States. This situation may have had something to do with the Greenbergian and Minimalist prejudice against theatricality in art. Or with the fact that art history as well as history is written from the point of view of the victors. Of course no one could have foreseen, 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 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 was surprised

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to see that ``Scream Against the Sky'' called Lee U-Fan, the theorist of Mono-Ha, a Japanese artist. He may live in Kamakura, Japan, but he is Korean. 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 aspect of Fluxus. Japanese artists not only played an originating and central role in the early days of the Fluxus movement in the early '60s, but Tatsumi Hijikata and Hi Red Center did independent work that paralleled Fluxus. To ask another awkward question: has anyone ever considered the influence of the Japanese 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, 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 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 predictive of postmodern practice. Shinohara's ``Imitation Art'' series of 1963-64--copies of Johns, Rauschenberg, and the Pop artists--was contemporaneous if not earlier than Elaine Sturtevant's similar work.

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

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monolithic as was once believed. Post-totalitarian, postcolonial, and postmodern art have intersected at unexpected angles. The inter-relationships between cultures have become increasingly complex. 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. And after the Oklahoma City bombing and the revelations of widespread white-supremacist state militias, even the dissolution of the United States no longer seems an absolute impossibility.

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 correctnesses? Can the increasingly global artworld--now that it has begun to realize that ``universal'' is little more than a modern code-word for a proseletyzing 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-cultural misunderstandings?

There has been talk in the past few months in Europe, or at least in Berlin, about a Marco Polo Syndrome: there was a symposium and a publication is planned. The term, the Marco Polo Syndrome, which was

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borrowed from an essay by Cuban art critic 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, in Berlin, a term of condemnation.

I believe that any effort to understand or explain another culture is by necessity flawed. Cross-cultural distortions, omissions, exaggerations, 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 Marco Polo being blamed for? This 13th century Venetian traveler to the court of Kublai Khan went there as an infant with his parents. He grew up in Asia, learned to speak and write several Asian languages, 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. Though he might have been responsible for the transformation of chow fun into pasta, Marco Polo was no imperialist colonizer: in fact, he may have been the first transcultural world citizen. The real problem seems to have been not that he misunderstood or exploited but that few people back in Venice were willing to believe his accounts of the achievements of these distant Asian cultures they were ignorant of, though his accounts supposedly led Columbus to seek this land of Cathey by sailing Westward.

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Well, I don't think we can blame Marco Polo for Columbus's errors, either navigational or sociopolitical. Mediations between different cultures are destined to be plagued by distortion, exoticization, ignorance, partial knowledge, and imbalances of power. Misunderstandings must be assumed. But however flawed, creative misunderstandings provoke new developments. We could do worse than to suffer from the Marco Polo syndrome.

We could do 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 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 realization that innovative work 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, buffeted by aspects of the same global process. Cross-cultural misunderstandings are unavoidable. Let's pause for a moment to consider the alternative to the Marco Polo Syndrome: it's called isolationism.

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