

Annette Van den Bosch

What makes the *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* so exciting and so different?

Richard Hamilton asked in his 1956 collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* So today I ask in the same ironic spirit What makes the *Asia-Pacific Triennial* so exciting and so different? Just as this irreverent but influential artwork challenged its audience on both sides of the Atlantic I will challenge the perceptions of those who seek to construct a postcolonial discourse from the metropolitan centre. I am an Australian critic speaking from the southern hemisphere about an exhibition of regional artists to an audience in London. This exhibition has significant implications for any theory of the postcolonial in art. One of the recent texts in this field which I found most compelling was Rasheed Araeen's "A New Beginning: beyond postcolonial cultural theory and identity politics" published in *Third Text* last Spring.¹ I do not agree with his pessimism though I am sympathetic to many of his arguments.

Asia-Pacific Triennials and Conferences are not new to the southern hemisphere. There have been three exhibitions and conferences at the Queensland Art Gallery (Brisbane) in the 1990s curated by varying committees representative of curators from countries in the region. These exhibitions and gatherings have become the most significant art events in Australia eclipsing even the well established and highly professional Biennales of Sydney. They have attracted political, institutional and corporate patronage and a broadly-based audience. What then makes the *Asia-Pacific Triennial* so exciting and so different?

First, I would argue that the APT has marked an historical shift away from the centre to exhibit the possibilities of constructive and exciting communicating through art to those of us who live in a region which is increasingly linked through economic, trade and strategic alliances but which has enormous historical, social and cultural differences. An important consideration here is that the recognition of the artists and artworks in the APT is not dependent on any notion of centre and periphery but on an aesthetic validity which is determined by selection by both local and regional curators, including the Australian host Gallery, and by the responsiveness of the audience to the artists and their work. The significance of this was argued by Pat Hoffie at the First APT when she said: "that a tension exists between the ways in which an audience educated in traditional European aesthetics might approach such works, and the ways in which such works re-negotiate and critique such reductive expectations, instead demanding a more contextually and conceptually informed approach."²

¹Araeen, R. "A New Beginning: beyond art postcolonial cultural theory and identity politics" *Third Text* 50 spring 2000 pp.3-20

²Hoffie, P. "1993 Art and Asia-Pacific Triennial: the Queensland Art Gallery's first survey of contemporary art in the region" *Art and Asia-Pacific* 1993 pp.16-26

One of the aspects of the APT that makes it so different is the disparities in the situation in which artists are selected. There are national and political regimes which are very hierarchical and far from professional, there are enormous distances in the Pacific and an almost total lack of infrastructure for the visual arts in Micronesia where the predominant form is performance and dance. Rustom Barucha has explored these disparities in his writing on the relations between the intercultural, the cross-cultural, the national and the global. Drawing on the work of Fritz Fanon and Stuart Hall, he argued for "the need to seek out a new critical internationalism which would include a profound respect for intercultural exchange through the mediation of different histories and postcolonial struggles".³ Therefore, I believe the challenge for critics who review the exhibition is take account of regional differences. While Rasheed Araeen has pointed out that the modernism taught under colonial regimes was imposed, I would argue that in settler countries such as Australia and New Zealand, and throughout the region, each country has modernized differently.⁴ I agree with Rasheed that the complexities of those processes have barely begun to be documented and acknowledged in some of the countries but not in all. What is exciting for critics and curators involved with the APT is that the choices of media and aesthetic modes made by artists are complex transactions in which traditional methods and iconologies, contemporary social and environmental concerns are all at play. It is this complexity, the shared familiarity with a visual language, and the necessity to communicate which makes the art at APT so compelling and provides the possibilities for a new critical internationalism.

In order to illustrate my argument I will show briefly half a dozen slides.

Slides

When Tisna Sanjaya exhibited *Thinking with the knee* in 1999 audiences were aware of the context for the work because many of us had seen such satirical artifacts carried by students for reformasi in the streets of Indonesia on our nightly news bulletins. Public art has been a critical formation in Indonesia and Sanjaya's artworks have had multiple audiences.

Matsuro Makamura's *QSC+V* 1998 was one of the most popular exhibits because as Yukiko Shukata pointed out, "Nakamura deliberately uses negative signs (weak icons) that are decidedly not Japanese, unearthing cultural differences residing in the urban landscape, and the visual unconscious of the everyday"⁵

Ah Xian's *China China* 1998 series of porcelain busts were the most beautiful and haunting artworks shown. They were intriguing because they brought together classical European sculpture, death masks, porcelain busts cast in the industrial centre of

³ Bharucha, R. "Interculturalism and its Discriminations: Shifting the agendas of the national, the multicultural and the global" *Third Text* 46 Spring 1999 pp.3-24, p.10

⁴ Araeen, R. "A New Beginning" P.6

⁵ Yukiko Shikata "Sign of the Times: Masato Nakamura and Command N" *Art and Asia-Pacific* "Reviews of the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial pp.54-59, p.59

Jingdezhen which is now very polluted and poisonous, and traditional decorative patterns which young Chinese regard as outdated and meaningless. Ah Xian who was born in Beijing has been a Sydney resident all his adult life so that the project for the series has been important for him personally, but notions of displacement or exile are too glib to explain his achievement or the impact of *China, China*.

Brahma Tirta Sari Studio and Utopia Batik undertook a collaborative project for APT 3 which could be described as inter-cultural. Aboriginal women from Utopia who have been practicing batik since 1977 went to Yogyakarta to work with the Studio in 1994 to learn the 'cap' batik technique. Both Collectives are based on the traditions with which the artists relate to the spiritual world. The project that was initiated in 1999, the *Songs of the Ancestors and Batik from the Land*, used 'cap' copper printing plates that incorporated Aboriginal symbols and Javanese traditional batik motifs, many with spiritual significance to produce a major textile, (10 metres) and many shorter pieces for exhibition at the APT. (3 metres).

Sonabai, detail. *Radha and Krishna on a swing*, 1999, APT 3

Adwasi artist, Sonabai came to Brisbane for two weeks to build her clay screen and relief paintings based on those which the women in the Rajwar community of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, make every year to celebrate the post-harvest festival. Sonabai has performed this task for fifty years in her village of Sarguja and in building on a tradition established her own artistic individuality.

In the performance by Michael Tuffery and Patrice Kaikilofe and friends, *The Clash of the povi, bulls*, 1999 two life-sized bulls fashioned from riveted corn beef cans were used in a performance in which percussion, dance and fireworks accompanied the charging bulls to create a dramatic spectacle which symbolized traditional forms of exchange through cultural display and feasting. The performance drew on the rituals of Pacific football matches to enact traditional rivalries and new social tensions within islander communities resulting from the pressures of global trading in the Pacific.

Xu Bing's installation, *New English Calligraphy* 1999 worked through audience participation, so that the inclusion of a children's room made this a particularly successful exhibit. As well as the opportunity to practice new English calligraphy in defiance and deference to Chinese classical calligraphy, the audience were offered a silk-worm farm in which the silk-worms voracious appetite for mulberry leaves was confirmed daily. All the aspects of his installation were concerned with the enjoyment which we derive from the disruption and breakdown of the signs of cultural recognition.

How has the *Asia-Pacific Triennial* facilitated the processes of exchange which have been happening for some time? After all there has been an increasing number of regional arts' exchanges, exhibitions and artists residencies, relationships and collaborations over the last twenty years.⁶ The importance of the Asia-Pacific Triennial is that contemporary art

⁶ See my "Interactions between Australia and Japan: Artists, Art, and Aesthetics" a paper given at XXXII

from across the region has been exhibited and discussed by a wide-ranging audience and not confined to an exchange between two or more. Associated with this there has emerged a deliberate policy of developing institutional and private collections which are more representative and inclusive, as well as the growth of specialized regional art markets. The APT has facilitated a dialogue that began with the acceptance of indigenous cultures and immigration and led to a recognition of the need to communicate. The situation for artists and audiences at the APT then, is quite different from that argued by Araeen in relation to Europe, that the new postcolonial subject has been disempowered.⁷

At the APT the struggle for meaning takes place in a series of complex processes of reception, which I think has been described rather deprecatingly in this session, as "Triangular Mutterings." Any artist at the APT will have multiple audiences. There are his or her local compatriots, an immigrant community in Australia, an audience from the region which is more or less familiar with the layers of influence and reference in the artwork, and a very mixed audience of Brisbane citizens to whom the Queensland Art Gallery as a public institution must appeal. The success of the APT has been that it has been accepted by all these groups. As well as the great diversity of media and artists concerns that produce this lively exhibition the presence of artists, curators and critics who come for the installation, the parties and the conference during the first week is central to its excitement. So too are the artists' gallery talks and the conversations with other critics and curators in which we do have triangular interchanges.

This brings me to the central problem in Araeen's article his failure to change his scale of reference from a modernist Paris in which many artists could live and participate in the avant garde project to the global art world of the late 20th and early 21st century. It is deeply ironic. for those of us for whom the trip to somewhere regarded as a metropolitan centre takes 30 hours or more by air to contemplate the notion of being included in the dominant narrative. Australians and others in the Region have been described by Europeans for centuries as producing art and culture which is derivative or hybrid. Australians of non-indigenous background, and indigenous Australians have gnashed their teeth at the valorization and exoticisation of indigenous art without reference to local debates and interactions.⁸ What is happening in the Asia-Pacific and not just at a particular exhibition is that cross-cultural and inter-cultural exchange is a living reality.

The critical debates at the conference have enlarged our understanding of contemporary art in the context of the region. For example, Hannah Fink argued that the APT challenges our notions of what contemporary art is and how it should be displayed.⁹

AICA Congress *Transition: Changing Society and Art* The Press of the International Association of Art Critics, Tokyo 1999.

⁷ Araeen, R. "A New Beginning" P.7

⁸For example, see my "Ten Years On: the provincialism problem" *Art Monthly* 8, 6 London May 1985 pp.9-13; and,

Maclean, I. "documenta X and Australians in oxford: Thinking globally from Europe" *Third Text* 42 Spring 1998, pp.57-70

⁹ Fink, H. "Fizz: the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial" *Art and Asia-Pacific* 27, 2000 pp. 20-22

Marion Pastor Roces who gave one of the opening addresses at the 1999 Conference pointed out that many of the objects displayed in museums as traditional were probably maquettes, objects that could only have come into being in the context of a nineteenth century traditional exposition. She argued against translating nineteenth century ethnographic notions of differences forged in homelands into twentieth century notions of difference. Rather, she argued that we need to see objects for what they are-encounters with the self- and the nature of our inter-relationships."¹⁰ That is, as art. Baruch has some useful thoughts in this context. He argued that: "multiculturalism is enriched not through accretion and absorption alone, but through a dismantling of preconceived legacies and genealogies. In order to gain something, we may have to give something up."¹¹ The APT challenges the Australian audience struggling with debates about immigration and multiculturalism to see things differently, and to question their assumptions. The exhibition challenges its artworld audience to view work from a multiplicity of perspectives and to expand their critical responses.

Finally, to those committed to indigenous rights and cultural diversity let me remind you that for those of us who live in settler societies and postcolonial nations cross cultural exchange and multiculturalism are life-saving concepts. The region has been impoverished by colonization, debt to the first world, war, and the movements of large numbers of people for purposes of the colonial-and now globalised economy. Racial and cultural tolerance offers the only means to develop peaceful and prosperous societies from historical circumstances which were not of our making. Communication promotes understanding and friendships, and art is a most powerful form. Kim Levin argued at the XXIX AICA Congress in Macao that:

"I believe that any effort to understand and explain another culture is by necessity flawed.....Misunderstandings must be assumed. But, however flawed, creative misunderstandings provoke new developments. The alternative is isolationism."¹²

--

¹⁰ Quoted by Fink, H. *ibid*

¹¹ Bharucha, R. "Interculturalism and its Discriminations" P.19

¹² Levin, K. "Asian Influence on Contemporary Art in the United States" *Art and Asia-Pacific* 3, 4 1996 (no.12) pp.49-55, p.55