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TRANSITION: CHANGING SOCIETY AND ART PANEL[QL]

Tokyo, Thursday October 1[QL]

<NO>re: rapid changes in technology, ``how it affects the world in which we live and its impact on the art of our times``[QL]

<AG> The first time I came to Japan, ten years ago, when there was still a heated discussion going on in the critical art community about postmodernism and post-postmodernism, I had the feeling that here in Tokyo I was witnessing the future. Or rather, one possible future. A future in which, instead of collapsing or imploding into postmodernity, as it appeared to be doing at that time in the west, modernism was alive and well, expanding and mutating into some new unforeseen dynamic shape in a future that hadn't been imagined in the west, partly because it was coming out of a very different past. It seemed as if a postmodern synthesis[MD]a cosmopolitan absorption and fusion of styles and cultures[MD] had already taken place, not in a way that made modernism obsolete or that denied Japanese tradition, but in a way that merged with Asian traditions to create a vital new kind of hypermodernity, or perhaps ultramodernity. My first point--which is almost embarrassingly simple but absolutely essential to state--is that it is no longer possible to believe that there is one single history of modernism. Modernism has different histories in different places. It is incremental and relative.

<NO>LOOK FOR UNFINISHED ASIAN ESSAY<AG>[QL]

[QL]

As for my feeling ten years ago in Tokyo of witnessing the future: It used to be said that New York in the early 20th century was a melting pot of cultures. Late 20th century Tokyo appeared to be (not socially but stylistically) the ultimate global melting pot, and a place where

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advanced technology was already highly visible in everyday life. Also a place where the theories of Jean Baudrillard, the artworld's philosopher of the moment (10 years ago)--who spoke of degrees of simulation, of copies without originals, and of hyperreality--were already actualities. Tokyo, I concluded in an essay that was never published, was the first hypermodern city. Modernism, which we in the west were in the process of writing off, was thriving in Asia, and was in the process of mutating into something new and different. Not having yet read Paul Virilio, it didn't occur to me to react in terms of his new notions of virtual time and space.[QL]

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This glimpse of an alternative hypermodern future provoked a revelation about the relativity of the past. Different elements of modernism arrived in different places at different times and under different circumstances--not necessarily accompanied by western notions of individuality or by western democracy. In the United States we pinpoint the Armory Show of 1913 as the moment modernism arrived in America, or we note that the Julien Levy Gallery introduced Surrealist art in New York during the 1930s, or we credit the large influx of European abstract artists in exile into the United States during the wartime years of the 1940s. By now, each country has its own history of modernism, its own crucial defining moments, and its own unique circumstances.[QL]

My second point is more like a question: What are we dealing with at this late date? Given the widely varying circumstance, and given the widespread dissemination of modernist ideologies on a number of different possible levels, ranging from the superficial adoption of modern forms or

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stylistic tics to the most profound internalization of modern concepts and beliefs, what ARE we dealing with? Is it, as has often been said in non-western contexts, a 20th century form of esthetic imperialism and colonization? Is it a parasitical esthetic phenomenon? Or could we begin to consider the spread of modernism, throughout the 20th century, as an agent or--to be more precise a catalyst--of cultural introspection, revitalization, or mutation within the host culture? At what point (if ever) does modernism lose its alienness to become an integral part of a non-western culture?[QL]

The answer, perhaps, depends on how alien the modern elements were in terms of the receiving culture. It may depend on whether these alien modern elements were imposed and unwelcome or whether they were appropriated willingly. It may depend on the vitality and the viability of the traditional culture. And mostly the answer depends on the degree of critique with which modernism was received. It may all simply boil down to the extent of creative distortion, cultural misunderstanding, and ideological subversion (all of which are positive factors) with which modernism was ingested. This leads to another question: has the exportation and importation of modernism created the conditions which made the recent multicultural global/local discourse inevitable?[QL]
[QL]

My attention was recently called to a remark that someone in the architectural community made about architecture in Asia: When Asians like something, they call it Modern. When they don't like it, they call it Western. This is a rather broad remark. However, in terms of art, we are gradually beginning to realize that many of the things we think of as coming from the west appeared as if by spontaneous combustion

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simultaneously in places around the globe. Other things we have long assumed as western innovations were initiated by non-western traditional cultures and later borrowed or stolen from them.[QL]

In Macao at the AICA Congress a few years ago I talked about the pervasiveness of Asian influence on contemporary art in the United States, on cross-cultural misunderstandings, delusions, fantasies, and western presumptions that the flow of influence is a one-way outward-bound street, and on mutual influence.[QL]

We all know that history is written from the point of view of the dominant power. Art history is written from the point of view of the dominant center, which in terms of the contemporary artworld was, after Paris, assumed to be New York. But as we also know, history, especially in transitional times, periodically undergoes a process of being rethought, revised, and rewritten. Right now a healthy decentering process is taking place. One byproduct of this is the exhibition tracing the history and development of performance and body art that recently traveled from L.A. to Vienna, which takes into account the Gutai Group and the Vienna Actionists, among other avantgarde work in a number of other places, to prove that this development has been a simultaneous multi-national phenomenon, rather than something which originated with Happenings in New York.[QL]

Another historically corrective exhibition will take place in the United States in the spring of 1999, organized with the premise that Conceptualism was not something that developed singularly in New York and then spread elsewhere, but was conceived simultaneously by diverse artists in Asia, South America, Europe, and other places apart from the United States. To some of us these two revisionary concepts seem self-

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evident. To others they are radical almost heretical ideas.[QL]

Perhaps it is time also to decenter and reenvision the very core of Modern Art. Perhaps we should rethink, on a more primal and fundamental level than has yet been attempted, the whole genesis of modern art. It has long been common knowledge that Manet, Monet, Tissot, and other 19th century artists were influenced by Asian esthetics and Japanese prints. And that in the early 20th century, Picasso and others, including German Expressionists, looked long and hard at traditional African sculpture. However, this knowledge has been presented art historically in terms of the acquisition of inspirational art objects and the use of isolated motifs or forms. These facts have been relegated to the status of footnotes. They have not been considered as crucial originating events.[QL]

An argument could be made that the generating impetus and concepts behind modern art were Asian and African, and that modern art came from traditional non-western cultures whose ideals and forms--creatively misunderstood, of course--were borrowed or stolen by artists in the West. Perhaps, and I say this more metaphorically than facetiously, we should consider Serge Guibaut's famous book, ``How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art from Paris,`` as the sequel to a yet unwritten book on earlier modern art: How Paris and Berlin stole the Idea of Modern Art from Asia and Africa.[QL]

To return finally to the subject of rapid change in technology and how it affects the world in which we live and the art of our time, [QL] If Marcel Duchamp were around today, he might appreciate the current ironies. In the final years of the 20th century, after decades of Duchampian efforts to dematerialize and conceptualize the art object, and after decades of Greenbergian efforts to come to terms with the art

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object's resistant materiality, the artworld has available the delights and delusions of computer-generated virtuality, which make possible the ultimate literal dematerialization of art. The lure of the new technologies is seductive. The resulting artworks, with a few exceptions, such as Pipilotti Rist and Mariko Mori, are still mostly primitive and disappointing. The more interesting effects to consider, regarding both society and art, are not in the realm of technology itself and artists' use of new techniques, but in pervasive perceptual side effects: it is inevitable that the new art will reflect--and it already is happening--alterations in our notions of reality and virtuality, and in our perceptions of space, distance, and time. [QL]

[QL]

Mariko Mori. Pipilotti Rist.

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