

**"Journeys and meetings:
cultural inclusion and exchanges in the midst of globalisation."**

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There has been an increasing manifestation of international art meetings recently. **My talk will comment and make comparisons between some of the various types of international art events that I have experienced in terms of cultural inclusion and exchanges.** I have also found that there are some major differences between state or state-related institutionally organised events and artist's initiated events. For a start I like to **examine some aspects of cultural inclusion and exchanges within state organised international events and then compare them with international events organised by artists' initiatives.**

State institutions organised events

Some of the state institutions organised events I have participated in and which I would like to discuss include the 'The 4th Asian Art Show' in Fukuoka Art Museum, Fukuoka (1994) and then later in Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo (1995), 'Kwang Ju Biennale'95' Kwang Ju, South Korea 1995, and 'The 3rd Asia Pacific Triennale'(APT), in Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) Brisbane, Australia, 1999-2000.

There have been many criticisms about regional art shows articulated at various times during different symposiums and conferences. As the Asian Art Show have now evolved into the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale (FAAT) hosted by a new Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (FAAM) and not only an exhibition, one expect that there have been some kind of reconciliations to the implied contradictions. I give my support to such a move although not without reservations. I would just like to highlight some of the criticisms which are more pertinent to my concerns as a practicing artist. Some of the comments on FAAT may also apply to APT in Brisbane and I will specify differences, if any, as I go along.

I consider my selection to the 4th Asian Art Show a result of a fortunate twist of fate. My selection was due to my involvement with the Artists Village¹, otherwise I would not have heard about the Asian Art Show. As at that time, the official mechanism in Singapore which the Fukuoka curators approached for assistance to select participants did not even mention the Artists Village to them. **It was only a chance encounter with an Artists Village member at an exhibition opening that brought to the attention of the Fukuoka curator of the existence of Artists Village, not to mention my obscure existence to the Singapore officials despite the small contemporary art scene in Singapore. This experience made me conscious of and therefore also question the nature of inclusion and exclusion by official state mechanisms.** The APT had a consultative curatorial process with independent critic, Lee Weng Choy in Singapore, which seems to me a positive direction.

One of the most often heard comment is that of the anachronism of having a regional Asian or Asia-Pacific show in an increasingly globalised situation of the world at large. It would be folly to avoid being aware of the necessity and importance of an international perspective in contemporary art practice in today's global situation. However we may also question the hegemonic nature of globalisation when mega-events that proclaim to be "international" fail to give a decent representation to artists practicing outside of the European-

¹ The Artists Village is an alternative art group started in 1988 in the last remaining farms of Singapore. Although evicted from the farm in 1990 due to urbanisation, it continues as group with no permanent space.

American circuit and context. **The global society is a fast growing phenomenon but not without its various disparities. Therefore the FAAT and APT in some ways addresses some of these disparities. If not for the Asian Art Show and now the FAAT, many artists from Asia may practice only within their own country of origin.** As I will elaborate more on artists' initiatives later, I would just like to mention here that (formerly West) European and North American artists as well as artists from richer countries like Japan and South Korea have more resources and possibility of travelling and working outside of their countries due to a comparatively better economic background.

Another related allegation is that Asia can be a questionable and imperialistic European invention which stretches over such a vast terrain. How can such a regional exhibition make adequate representation in its entirety? With the Kwang Ju Biennale coming into existence in 1995 with the ambitious agenda to put artists from Asia on the same platform with the other continents, one may need to re-access the question of representation with regard to FAAT and APT. Unfortunately the seemingly comprehensive international concept that Kwang Ju Biennale '95 offers was marred by the chaotic organisation and management whereby artists are treated like animals to be presented in a mega-global cultural zoo. This also happened at the Sexta Bienal de la Habana in Havana, Cuba, 1997, which situate itself as a protagonist for artists of the Third-World and other globally marginalised countries while yet highlighting the Latin-American countries. **In the last Asia-Pacific Triennale, the introduction of "Crossing Borders" created a possibility for inclusion of artists practising beyond the boundaries of their countries of origin. Still, these artists predominantly originated from the Asia-Pacific region.** One can never completely satisfy everyone's call for a more extensive inclusion. During the last APT Conference audiences voiced their unhappiness over this question several times that made it sound like an endless lobbying opportunity for each and every marginalised social group trying to get through the gates of an art paradise. A well organised event is always limited by economic and managerial capacity, no matter its ideals and aspirations for the most optimal and appropriate representation. However attempts must be made.

Many also question if artists should be selected and categorised within quotas based on their country of origin or practice. I would not worry too much about quotas as this again is difficult to satisfy everyone. **I feel ambivalent about categorisation by country, as our place of origin is a major part of one's identity and hence impossible to avoid. It seems overly idealistic not to acknowledge where one is from in relation to any cultural practice. But as I spend more time outside my country of origin, I sympathise more with the logic of APT's "Crossing Borders" section which may be advantageous for FAAT to emulate.**

Perhaps a more serious problem would be an apparent privileging of some artists and creating an invisible hierarchy. Asia has its vast diversity in terms of history and culture and there are various unique contexts which need a specialist museum like FAAM in order for it to be given due attention and study. Again this may also apply for the APT which also give the smaller pacific islands enhanced visibility, which otherwise would be forgotten by the global community at large. And yet it is at the APT where one finds the invisible hierarchy more apparent where the Japanese artists were given a higher profile in the 2nd APT and at the 3rd APT, Chinese artists took center stage. One must be vigilant that these events may be interpreted in geo-political terms and having a hegemonic tendency.

In the exhibition catalogue for the 1st FAAT, FAAM's curator, Raiji Kuroda gave an optimistic introduction outlining its noble theme and commendable motive of opening up communication as "channels of hope", to go beyond national, ethnic and religious fundamentalism as well as insularity, in order to

contribute to the emerging global society.² The previous Asian Art Show series from Fukuoka may be said to have set the precedence of leading towards an increased interest in Asian art within Japan. Unfortunately, the interest has not yet gone much further than a fledgeling superficial fad. Asian art is still a marginal phenomenon in Japan. But one can also say that of any foreign art in Japan and any other country for that matter. Yet, one can contrast this with the strong bias towards an ever-present Euro-American-centric gaze. Artists participating in large Asian group exhibitions, hardly draw any critical or analytical assessment much less to say on an individual basis. Without critical analysis it is like listening to the music and ignoring the words and poetry in a song. Artists would like to know who is looking at them and how they are seen?

Artists Initiatives

Since 1994, Seiji Shimoda has organised an annual **Nippon International Performance Art Festival (NIPAF) in Japan**. The festival started in one venue in Shimoda's home town, Nagano and has grown over the years to include Tokyo, Nagoya and Hiroshima. In 1998, artist and "Namchewit - Action for Aids" activist, Chumpon Apisuk organised **Asiatopia in Bangkok**, Thailand. Artist, Arahmaiani has also started an international performance art festival in Jakarta, Indonesia this March. In **Cologne, Germany**, Boris Nieslony runs an "**Artists Service Association**" (ASA) which organise international performance art seminars and meetings and also serve as a link and exchange center for artists. Artist Richard Martel of **Le Lieu, an alternative art organisation in Quebec, Canada** organises various international meetings as well as bi-lateral exchanges and residencies. ASA and Le Lieu have increasingly sought out Asian artists in recent years through this network. **All of the above are also in contact with each other and are a growing international performance art network.**

Some events like the "**Castle of Imagination**" an international performance and multi-media art festival started in 1993 and organised by Wladyslaw Kazmierzak in Sluspk, Poland and "**International Nature Art Symposium**" organised by Yatoo in Kongju, South Korea, 1995 may not have the comparable resources to pay substantial artist's fees and air transport to foreign artists. Hence their strategy is often to invite a longer list of artists than will finally participate in actuality. Such open-ended, over-invitation often result in an uneven representation and inclusion of artists of closer proximity or else only the artists of better economically endowed countries with easier access to funding. Yattoo invited some 80 odd artists where more than half of those invited participated, of which a large proportion of them came from richer European countries. Seeing the large number of artists that Yattoo were able to provide food and accomodation for nearly a month, one wonders if these resources could be put to better use by inviting a smaller and more selective group and for a shorter period. Some of the best events I have participated in involved no more than 10 to 15 artists for a 4 to 10 days stay. Such a number actually allows more time and possibility for real inter-personal and cultural exchanges between the participants than those larger events where there is too much art and meaning to be managed and absorbed at one time.

As artists organising these events also participate in them, there is a creeping tendency towards nepotism whereby network becomes a kind of relationship enhancement and hence artists get invited to each other's event with maybe less emphasis or criterion on the organiser-artists' art practice in itself. Artists' initiatives tend towards a more ambiguous selection for inclusion and participation and hence have less curatorial directions. However this may be deemed to be part of the necessary experimentation which allows for more

spontaneity and opportunity for unexpected new works to develop in a process based on a more subjective quality of intensity as opposed to a more rigid curatorial practice.

Although there have been informal symposiums and dialogue sessions held at these initiatives, it is often not easy to have a satisfactory exchange and representation, due to language diversity as well as the limitation of funding. Catalogues and magazines published by these initiatives help to fill the lack of critical assessment as they do not often easily get noticed by mainstream media. However, as they are usually written by participants, it is hard to assert in their credibility and objectivity.

Artists initiatives with scarce funding resources also result in limitations on the kind of projects artists are able to carry out. Besides the transporting, accomodating and feeding the artist, the availability of space, material and equipment are also crucial elements that contribute to the nature of works produced. Performance art festivals such as NIPAF, restricted to theatre spaces have received many criticisms of its leaning towards experimental theatre as artists respond to the spaces they are forced to work in. However, artists conscious of these limitations can often overcome them with some imaginative strategy.

One of the most successful artists initiated international events I have experienced is "**Construction in Process VI - The Bridge**" held in Melbourne, Australia, 1998. The project was originally conceptualised during the birth of Poland's "**Solidarity**" movement in Lodz, 1981 by Artists Museum, an alternative art initiative conceptualised by Ryszard Wasko. In recent times, they have held the event in foreign countries with affiliate chapters in Israel and Australia. The Melbourne chapter was led by Richard Thomas and a team of enthusiastic artists and volunteers. Except for artists fee, they provided almost anything requested for some 50 invited foreign artists for their projects with very little restrictions. Together with some 50 more Australian artists, performances and installations could be done in a wide variety of inner city as well as surrounding suburban and countryside areas. There was a cordial atmosphere where artists and volunteers helped each other selflessly and casual dialogues were held almost every evening. However such a large undertaking is difficult to repeat with equal success by an artist initiative assisted by an army of self-motivated volunteers and adequate sponsorship. That an artist initiative organising an international event could be started in one country and then become so successfully held in other countries is indeed commendable. However, the last evening of discussion revealed a conflict of interest in a New York chapter's attempt to bring the event to New York in the year 2000. Artists Museum of Lodz, Poland wanted to bring the event back to their hometown to celebrate that elusive, enigmatic millenium date. Although this may have arisen due to the disparity in the reality of the political-economic situation of artists from less economically developed former east European country's refusal to let a richer and stronger country have its hegemonic leeway, with the Lodz artists' insistent claim to ownership of an artists' initiated international event concept, they revealed an ulterior neo-nationalism beneath their apparent international idealism.

Internationalisation or neo-nationalism?

I would like to refer to some aspects of the recent Nokia-Singapore Art 1999 held at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) in relation to the aforementioned. Although this exhibition is not yet of international stature, one may speculate that it has the potential of becoming a Southeast Asian regional show given the government's agenda to make Singapore a regional cultural hub of Southeast

² Kuroda, Raiji, "On Exhibition Theme 'Communication: Channels of Hope', The 1st Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale 1999 Catalogue, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan, pg.14-15

Asia.³ Geography is created by power and regionalism begins with hegemony.⁴ Behind the mythical post-colonies seeking national identity by means of cultural manifestations and exchanges is the torment of being anxious bystanders and minor players in the face of superfluous spectacles of the richer nations.

Nokia-Singapore Art 1999, has evolved over the years directly as a descendent of National Day exhibitions celebrating Singapore's independence since 1965. SAM's curator, Ahmad Mashadi's recent speech in a conference held last year in Tokyo, unashamedly proclaimed SAM's complicity to the state's omnipresent domination even in the cultural domain, by way of intentionally and consciously appropriating alterity for its mythical nation-building aspirations.⁵ Mashadi even had the gumption to recommend that artists take a strategy of "developing codes to be applied into their works, allowing for multiple meanings as well as differentiating and managing the readings made by differing audiences" as a means to bypass the strict censorship that Singapore is famous for.⁶ Such blatant confessions of collusion to the state's restrictive projections are rare in any art museums elsewhere. However one must also ask if these agenda are not also present, perhaps with more subtlety and sophistication, hence not easily discernible, in all the triennales and biennales supported by the state or even some of the artists initiated international events; a "neo-nationalism" in the disguise of internationalisation.

Conclusion: Transnational and Postnational formations

The excessive use of the term "globalisation" and "international" to describe any process or relationship that crosses state boundaries hasten one to prefer using the word "transnational" as many linkages are not truly "inter-national" of involving nation/states but corporate or individual actors. The transnational arena of individual actors, groups, movements, business enterprises and diversities of organisations may seem to negate the continued significance of the "national". However this may not necessarily herald the decline of the nation-state but only changing its nature towards one of increased sophistication in interpreting nationalism less we are more conscious of a more specific alternative. Anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai identified the rise of "postnational formations".⁷ Implications of the postnational includes the formation of allegiance and identity beyond the nation-states, emerging alternative organisation of global traffic in resources, images and ideas and the steady erosion of the capabilities of the nation-state to monopolize loyalty.⁸ "Postnational formations and non-national movements are forced by the very logic of actually existing nation-states to become antinational or antistate and thus to inspire the very state power that forces them to respond in the language of counternationalism."⁹ In order to escape this

³ C.J. Wan-ling, Wee, "National Identity, the Arts and the Global City", forthcoming in July 2000, Derek da Cunha (ed.), "Singapore in the New Millennium: Challenges Facing the City-State", Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). (Wee's essay is focused on the theatre scene in Singapore but many of his comments has wider cultural implications as well. Concerning state policies he cited the agenda outlined in "Singapore - Global City for the Arts", Singapore, Economic Development Board (EDB) and Ministry of Information and The Arts (MITA), Singapore, 1992 which reveals Singapore's grand ambition to be a centre of culture in East Asia. Wee commends on the shortcomings of Singapore's technocratic approach by emphasising a nationalistic, "pragmatic economic developmentalism" and advocates going beyond "instrumentalist-rational attitudes".)

⁴ Southeast Asia could be said to be created by Japanese occupation of the region in 1941-42. See Anderson, Benedict, "The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World", Verso 1999, London

⁵ Mashadi, Ahmad, "Appropriating Alterity: the Museum and Contemporary Practice in Singapore", in "Asian Art: Prospects for the Future", The Japan Foundation Asia Center, 1999, pg.89-95. Also see Singapore's pioneer theatre director and cultural award winner, Pao Kun, Kuo, "Give the arts free rein to bloom", in The Straits Times, Singapore, Nov 21/1999 where he described the state's domination in Singapore culture and pleads for more autonomy.

⁶ *ibid*, footnote 12 on pg. 94

⁷ Appadurai, Arjun, "Modernity at Large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization", University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, pg.159

⁸ *ibid*, pg. 169

⁹ *ibid*, pg.166

vicious circle, Appadurai advocates a search for a new language "to capture the complex, nonterritorial, postnational forms of allegiance".¹⁰

Surely, with openness to renewal and enhanced self-consciousness on the nature of our activities, independent art initiatives as well as state institutions, in organising transnational meetings are an important site for research and contribution to the creation of this new language. A new consciousness that is not mired by neo-nationalism, nation-state's hegemony or other ideological disguises. Given the inevitable globalisation, it would be advantageous for state official bodies to support the postnational project as well and develop a broader perspective beyond the nationalistic frame or paradigm.

The support and sponsorship of art by the nation-state is not without its varied history. I would like to refer to the British model for consideration here. Sociologist, Raymond Williams in discussing cultural policies, cited the creation of the British Arts Council as historically a post-war, Keynesian body. Williams identified four different definitions for such a state cultural institution in Keynes formulation of the Arts Council: -

- 1) the idea of patronage
- 2) what he calls pump-priming- liken to supporting a pioneer industry which should become self-supporting in the long run.
- 3) an intervention into the market.
- 4) encouraging an expanding and changing popular culture.

The actual implementation of public policy based on all four principles would be difficult to maintain with equal balance, given the nature of bureaucratic procedures. Following a point by point critical assessment, Williams identified the fourth definition as most worthy of priority and motivation for state policies for the arts. As Keynes put it:

*"The task of an official body is not to teach or to censor, but to give courage, confidence and opportunity. Artists depend on the world to live in and spirit of the age. There is no reason to suppose that less native genius is born into the world in the ages empty of achievement than in those brief periods when nearly all we most value has been brought to birth. New work will spring up more abundantly in unexpected quarters and in unforeseen shapes when there is a universal opportunity for contact with traditional and contemporary arts in their noblest forms."*¹²

As Williams observed, "It is in the nature of the fourth definition - that of encouraging a serious, expanding and changing popular culture - that the whole question of the nature and purposes of art is being redefined, and that the key element of this redefinition is openness."¹³ Indeed, it is this *openness for the redefinition of popular culture* which I trust Kuroda speaks of in his introduction to the 1st FAAT's catalogue and which should be underlying the ideals of most transnational art meetings, whether state, corporate or artist organised.

State support and funding is often required in one way or another to fulfill international projects, large or small, whether organised by state or corporate institutions or artists initiatives. Artists have a preferential interest in this direction. Especially for performance artists, being a discipline that is a direct

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pg.166

¹¹ Williams, Raymond, "Politics and Policies: The Case of the Arts Council", in "The Politics of Modernism", Verso, 1997, pg. 142-143

¹² *ibid*, pg. 143

¹³ *ibid*, pg.148

and personal tool for the continued experimentation in the search of a new sense of self in response to the porous fluidity of social and cultural structures in the postmodern and globalised world. Also performance art is not something you can send across the world for an exhibition without the artist being there. The postmodern experience shows that there is a diversity and multiplicity across the spectrum of human affairs. **Through the discourse based on performance and action vis-a-vis with a global community, a new sense of self takes on the determination of values and is indicative of a postnational ethical dimension of human life.**)

As the world changes from a post-Cold War bi-polarity to that of multicentricity, we cannot continue to depend on the comparison of cultures by putting one country next to another as if they were independent of each other. ¹⁴ Transnational art events both organised by state institutions as well as artists initiatives have intrinsic roles to play in creating cultural 'translocalities', to use Appadurai's term. ¹⁵ Translocalities are by themselves contexts as well as creating new contexts to provide a frame whereby human actions can be initiated, conducted and performed beyond national boundaries in a globalised community. However it will require a higher level of self-conscious commitment and criticality in order for transnational art events to continue being meaningful and relevant to the ever-changing world.

¹⁴ Appadurai, Arjun, "Modernity at Large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization", University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, pg.166-167, Appadurai referred the term, "multicentric" to James Rosenau's "Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity" Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1990.

¹⁵ Ibid, pg. 184