

Afterword

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My fascination with contemporary art in Asia began in the early 1970s upon meeting Nam June Paik, the Korean-born, Japan and German educated artist living in New York. An avid reader (in at least four languages) of cutting edge information (in a range of disciplines including history, philosophy, economics, science, and art), he exuberantly exchanged ideas. With a mischievous smile and a twinkle in his eyes, Paik thrived on experimentation and surprise. While he shared John Cage's interest in chance operations, Paik's concerns had more to do with discovering new possibilities. He relished the aleatory's correlations to modern software and hardware music composition tools, synthesizers, and effects processors with their "randomization" features, which became central to his creative processes in video. Recycling became a fundamental aspect of Paik's work for practical (economic) and aesthetic reasons, with the TV as a core building block.

I took great delight in Paik's observation from a public lecture: "I believe in timing. Somehow, you have to be at a certain point at a certain time. You have to 'meet the time,' as they say in Chinese history." As art historians and curators we meet the past from the vantage point of the present, on the cusp of the future. Our challenge is how best to use today's knowledge and technologies as we dig deeply for a better understanding of complex cultures. We begin by contextualizing encountered work, contemplating aesthetics and formal aspects, on the level of visual information. Getting down into the intellectual or philosophical content slowly comes with study and time.

When I started out my career as a young curator in the mid-1970s, artists in disparate parts of the world experimented with alternatives to traditional art-making. Intangible, time-based practices became options, best suited to seat-of-the-pants style, artist-run events and venues that were sprouting up in metropolises everywhere. Viewers became participants and engaged in a more active relationship with image and sound. This was decades before fax and the Internet, when international phone calls were prohibitively expensive. Artists discovered kindred spirits abroad by

reading interviews in art magazines and by creating such grassroots exchanges as self-published 'zines and mail art.

The late 1970s in Asia, North and South America, and Europe marked the transition from avant-garde art to contemporary art. Each region had its own distinct history. Artists were reading, and a handful traveled to participate in international shows like *Documenta*. Today we discuss contemporaneity, and embrace multiplicity and regional divisions. Media, installation, and performance have become the lingua franca of *globalized* art. Some artists have international followings and many opportunities abroad, and are able to avoid being fenced in.

How do we best look back at art made in Asia between the 1960s and the present? How do we contextualize the practices of international, interventionist artists? Ferreting out primary reference materials, often in overlooked archives, and by using original documents and resources we come up with new insights. (Asia Art Archives in Hong Kong is an invaluable resource.) In this way, previously unrecognized or barely acknowledged movements, artists, and groups from non-Western backgrounds are being incorporated into canonical narratives of 20th and 21th century art history.

The speakers at "Spectacle East Asia: Translocation, Publicity, and Counterpublics," many of whom have the necessary language skills and backgrounds in cultural studies, are in a strong position as the youngest generation of thinkers to articulate new perspectives on contemporary art practices where variety and diversity have replaced unified value. Their papers in this publication reveal how they are set to unravel information and establish new frameworks. This vivid "mosaic" of methods and intentions is effectively putting contemporary trends into a broader historical or cultural context.

The papers probe substantial topics with relevant new insights.¹ Zheng Bo deftly traces the advent of Chinese contemporary art back to the late 1970s Stars group, which stated that every artist is a star, as the group confronted their formative years stifled by the drab uniformity of the Cultural Revolution. He contextualizes how the Stars generation's activities occurred within a political and cultural movement that constructed a transient public sphere. By using the format of outdoor, public exhibition of artworks, the artists adhered

¹ Here, the author limits her discussion to the articles in this issue that concentrate specifically on art. We regret that Zheng Bo was unable to contribute his essay from the "Spectacle East Asia" Conference on the Stars Outdoor Art Exhibition to this issue; it is scheduled to appear in an upcoming anthology on Chinese contemporary art. —ed.

to the method of public display for Communist Party-sanctioned posters. He cogently argues that that the artists derived much of their energy from the public sphere.

Caitlin Bruce explores the processes of writing in public, both as protest and as social communication. She carefully develops her position, basing her arguments around the practice of Zhang Dali, who during the 1990s spray-painted more than two thousand giant profiles of his own bald head on buildings scattered around Beijing. He placed the profile alongside “*chai*” characters painted by city authorities to indicate that a building was scheduled for demolition. Bruce poignantly concludes with a word of caution about how attention often is engaged by art that is designed as grand spectacle rather than the more authentic voice that lies in the engaging, personal inscriptions discovered in urban spaces.

Rika Hiro examines an early media work by Kō Nakajima, the video pioneer acclaimed for his early animations. Nakajima had fervent utopian ideals for media and worked with community groups and early public access cable television in Japan. Hiro uses Nakajima’s bold action, *What is Photography?*, to delve into this artist’s exploration of video’s live aspect and photography’s time delay (the need to send exposed 35mm film to a lab to be processed and developed.) The contrast between the immediately accessible image, as opposed to the delayed one, was set up as an interaction between a nude model and ten male photographer/artists confined together in a closed room. The reactions Nakajima did and did not elicit ranged from general apathy to video as a new art form, to having his use of “traditional” subject matter taken as pornography. The artist’s self-censorship in the face of strict censorship laws and his anticipation of a feminist backlash has kept the work largely unknown to this day.

The papers by the first-rate art historians collected in this publication point to a dynamic decade ahead. The future is bright with new understandings and new insights as evidenced by the innovative scholarship here.