





CONTRIBUTORS

**Emma Budgen:** Programs Manager/Senior Curator, The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt; previous Director of Artspace, Auckland, and Curatorial Director of Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts, Auckland; recent curatorial projects include *Saskia Leek: Desk Collection*, The Dowse Art Museum; *Crystal City: Contemporary Asian Artists*, The Dowse; and *Cao Fei: Utopia*, IMA, Brisbane, Artspace, Auckland, The Dowse and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery; has written for publications including *Art & Australia*, *Artlink*, *Art New Zealand* and various artist books and catalogues

**Rex Butler:** Teaches in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History, University of Queendland specialising in contemporary and Australian art; currently working on a book on Deleuze and Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?*

**Colin Chinnery:** Artist and curator based in Beijing; Director in 2009 and 2010 of ShContemporary Art Fair in Shanghai; Chief Curator/Deputy Director, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing; Arts Manager, British Council, Beijing 2003-06

**Andrew Clifford:** Curator, Centre for Art Research, The University of Auckland; curatorial projects include *Reuben Paterson: Bottled Lighting*, Gus Fisher Gallery, Auckland and Peloton, Sydney, 2012; and *Living Room: Metropolis Dreaming*, Auckland Council, 2011; recent essays in John Reynolds monograph *Certain Words Drawn, Erewhon Calling: Experimental Sound in New Zealand*, and a chapter on invented instruments for *Home, Land and Sea: Situating Music in Aotearoa*; recipient of the Creative NZ/Asia:NZ curator’s fellowship to Asia; contributor to many journals including *Eyeline*, *Art Asia-Pacific*, *Art New Zealand* and *Art News New Zealand*; has general interests in media and time-based arts, particularly sound or relationships between music and art, as well as art of the Asia-Pacific region

**Natasha Conland:** Curator Contemporary Art, Auckland Art Gallery; recent curatorial projects include *Made Active: The Chartwell Show*, on sculpture and performance (2012), Opening exhibitions *Simultaneously Modern: Et Al.*, *Peter Robinson*, *Dane Mitchell* (2011), *Last Ride in a Hot Air Balloon: The 4th Auckland Triennial* (2010); previous exhibitions include *Mystic Truths* (2007), the 2006 *SCAPE Biennial of Art in Public Space*, co-curator of the CAFÉ 2 project for the *Busan Biennale*, South Korea; curated et al.’s the fundamental practice for New Zealand’s representation to the Venice Biennale (2005); writes regularly on contemporary art and is co-editor of *Reading Room: A Journal of Art and Culture* published annually by the E.H. McCormick Library, Auckland Art Galler

**Itfikhhar Dadi:** Associate Professor, Department of History of Art; Chair, Department of Art at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; has published numerous scholarly works, including the recent book *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (2010), and co-edited *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space* (2012) and *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading* (2001); editorial advisory board member BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies; curated or co-curated *Lines of Control*, Herbert F Johnson Museum of Art (2012), *Tarjama/Translation*, Queens Art Museum (2009) and Herbert F Johnson Museum of Art (2010); and *Anwar Jalal Shemza-Take 1: Calligraphic Abstraction* (2009), Green Cardamom, London; as a practicing artist, he collaborates with Elizabeth Dadi and has shown widely internationally; exhibited in *Third Asia-Pacific Triennial* (1999)

**Michael Desmond:** Independent curator and writer whose publications include ‘Present Tense: An imagined grammar of portraiture in the digital age’ (2010); ‘Imagining Space: Jacky Redgate 1980–2003’ (2005); ‘Leonardo da Vinci: The Codex Leicester’ (2001); ‘Love Hotel’ (1997); ‘Islands: Contemporary installation from Europe, America, Asia and Australia’ (1996) (exhibition catalogue with Kate Davidson); ‘1968’ (1995) (exhibition catalogue with Christine Dixon) and ‘European and American Paintings and Sculpture 1870-1970 in the Australian National Gallery’ (1992) (with Michael Lloyd); as well as numerous articles and reviews

**Patrick Flores:** Professor of Art Studies, Department of Art Studies, University of the Philippines, which he chaired from 1997 to 2003; Curator of the Vargas Museum in Manila; Adjunct Curator, National Art Gallery, Singapore; one of the curators of *Under Construction: New Dimensions in Asian Art* (2000) and the *Gwangju Biennale* (Position Papers) (200; Visiting Fellow, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (1999) and Asian Public Intellectuals Fellow (2004); among his publications are *Painting History: Revisions in Philippine Colonial Art* (1999), *Remarkable Collection: Art, History, and the National Museum* (2006), and *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia* (2008); grantee of the Asian Cultural Council (2010) and member of the Advisory Board of the exhibition *The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds After 1989* (2011), Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe and member of the Guggenheim Museum’s Asian Art Council (2011)

**Lily Hibberd:** Melbourne-based artist, writer and founding editor of *un Magazine*; represented by Galerie de Roussan, Paris; recent performances and exhibitions include *The Woman in the Bridge*, ArtBAR, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2012, and *Anti-panopticon*, *Museum of Freud’s Dreams*, Saint Petersburg, 2012, and *Seeking a Meridian*, Paris, 2011, and *Benevolent Asylum* (just for fun) with WART, Performance Space WALK, 2011; contributor to journals including *Column*, *Eyeline*, *ART iT*, and to exhibition publications such as *Parallel Collisions*, 2012 *Adelaide Biennale of Australian Art* catalogue

**Pat HOFFIE:** Brisbane-based artist who has worked in the Asia-Pacific region for the past three decades; curator in the first *APTs*; artist on two Asialink residencies; as researcher/artist with Dr. Caroline Turner on the Art and Human Rights projects and publications; and as an artist working with other artists in the region on the Fully Exploited Labour projects; currently director of SECAP (Sustainable Environment through Culture), Queensland College of Art, and is UNESCO Orbicom Chair in Communications, Griffith University

**Ranjit Hoskote:** Bambay-based cultural theorist, curator, and poet; author of numerous books on Indian art and artists; since 1993, he has curated or co-curated numerous exhibitions of contemporary art including India’s first-ever national pavilion at the 54th *Venice Biennale*, Venice, 2011; co-curated (with artistic director Okwui Enwezor and co-curator Hyunjin Kim) the 7th *Gwangju Biennale*, Gwangju, 2008, and (with seven curators) *Under Construction*, Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 2000-02

**Hou Hanru:** Director of Exhibitions and Public Program and Chair of Exhibition and Museum Studies, San Francisco Art Institute 2006-12; has curated numerous exhibitions including *Cities On The Move* (1997–2000), *Shanghai Biennale* (2000), *Gwangju Biennale* (2002), *Venice Biennale* (French Pavilion, 1999, *Zone Of Urgency*, 2003, Chinese Pavilion, 2007), *2nd Guangzhou Triennial* (2005), *10th Istanbul Biennial* (2007), *The Spectacle of the Everyday*, *10th Lyon Biennale* (Lyon, 2009); recently co-directed *The World Biennial Forum No 1: SHIFTING GRAVITY* with Ute Meta Bauer; currently curating 5th *Auckland Triennial* (New Zealand, May–August 2013)

**Claire Hsu:** Co-Founder and Executive Director, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, widely regarded as one of the world’s leading public collections of primary and secondary source material about contemporary art in Asia

**Lee Weng Choy:** president of the Singapore Section of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA); artistic co-director, The Substation Arts Centre, Singapore 2000-09; has lectured at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Sotheby’s Institute of Art, Singapore, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; his essays have appeared in *Broadsheet*, *Forum On Contemporary Art & Society*, *Theory in Contemporary Art* since 1985, *Third Text*, and *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art*

**Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez:** Assistant Professor, University of the Philippines Department of Art Studies; curatorial consultant Lopez Museum (2005-2012); presently a member of the Advisory Board of Asia Art Archive, and guest curator 2011 Jakarta Biennale; her writing has appeared in *Forum on Contemporary Art and Society*, *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*, *C-Arts: Asian Contemporary Art and Culture*, *Metropolis M: Magazine on Contemporary Art*, *Pananaw: Philippine Journal of Visual Arts*, and *Ctrl+P: Journal of Contemporary Art*

**Andrew Maerkle:** Writer and editor based in Tokyo; Deputy Editor of the Japanese bilingual online publication *ART iT*, and contributor to numerous international publications

**Simon Soon:** PhD Candidate in Art History, University of Sydney; participated in Japan Foundation JENYSES residency program in Tokyo, Manchester International Festival Talent Campus; written commissioned essays for National Visual Art Gallery of Malaysia and National Art Gallery of Singapore; contributor to a number of journals and blogs including *C-Arts*, *New Mandala* and *Modern Art Asia*; writes broadly on both modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art history

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**Editorial inquiries, advertising and subscriptions may be sent to the Editorial Office:**  
Broadsheet  
14 Porter Street Parkside South Australia 5063  
Tel +61 [08] 8272 2682 Fax +61 [08] 8373 4286  
Email: editor@cacsa.org.au  
**www.cacsa.org.au**

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Contact the Administrator, Contemporary Art Centre of SA—admin@cacsa.org.au

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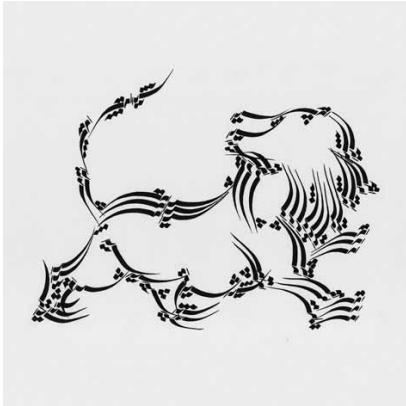




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COVER: Simon Goiyap, *Koromb*, 2012; from the 7th Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 8 December 2012–14 April 2013  
Photo courtesy the artist

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# REFLECTIONS ON THE FIRST DECADE

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## IFTIKHAR DADI

Sufficient time has passed since the founding in 1993 of the *Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* to reflect on its historical significance. I will focus here on the formative role the APT has played in the development of contemporary Asian art during the 1990s. I begin with a narrative of my involvement with the APT. I grew up in Karachi, Pakistan, went to the USA for higher studies, and returned to Karachi during the 1990s, working and living as an artist. I was aware of contemporary art in the USA and Europe, and was beginning to become cognisant of contemporary practices emerging in East, South and Southeast Asia. But from Karachi, there was very little knowledge or awareness of artistic developments in neighboring India, not to speak of other areas in Asia. Karachi during the 1990s was facing a very difficult time, a depressed economy and deteriorating law and order, with the result that due to lack of journals, magazines and visitors and before the age of the Internet, one felt cut off from developments outside and remained isolated.

One sensed that learning about the challenges and breakthroughs that contemporary Asian artists were making at that time was far more salient than the more remote social and institutional context in which Western contemporary art flourished. But this was not possible. Indeed, it was not until about 1996 that I became aware of the scope and ambition of the APT project, and this recognition came about through discussions with Thai curator Apinan Poshyananda, and Indian artist Nalini Malani, whom I had met at an exhibition in Europe that year.

It must be stressed also that the question of multiculturalism in contemporary art was just beginning to emerge as a significant issue globally in the early 1990s, as exemplified by Rasheed Araeen's curated exhibition, *The Other Story* in the UK in 1989, and the controversy surrounding *Magiciens de la Terre* held that same year. So the fact that APT1 was mounted as early as 1993 is significant. Although Japanese institutions had played an important institutional role in examining the question of Asia and its modern art from the 1970s—as I have learned subsequently from the scholarship of Wan-ling Wee and others—nevertheless, in its scale, criticality and its timing during the critical decade of the 1990s, the APT emerged as a key force in formulating an understanding of emergent practices in much of the Asian region.

One of the challenges facing the APT in its first decade during the 1990s was nothing less than mapping emergent currents in its contemporary art, in many ways, an impossible charge. It must be remembered that Asia was never, and is still not, a stable construct, and its valences change, depending on where one is situated. For example, East Asia is often privileged in many discussions about Asia to the degree that it stands in for Asia itself. At other times, the developed emerging economic giants such as China, India and Japan wield silent discursive privilege, so that artists from these nations enjoy far greater opportunities in the international arena as compared to artists from smaller or less developed regions. And finally, the more one moves westward, the less secure the appellation of “Asia” appears to be, so that even today, despite the conception of Central Asia and West Asia, many informed people remain puzzled by the inclusion of Turkey and Iraq as being fully Asian, for example.

Furthermore, as a continent, Asia contains well over half of the global population, and is home to probably more diversity in terms of languages, cultures, religions, as well as in the unevenness of its development, than possibly any other continent. Asia has also produced an enormous diaspora scattered across the world. So how useful can the term “Asia” possibly be in characterising such scope and heterogeneity? Asia is undoubtedly on one level the emptiest of categories and a juicy target for deconstruction, but I believe we must nevertheless continue to wrestle with its connotations—if only because it is an established social fact—and to repurpose its meanings towards more equitable and just significations. I believe the APT project, by grappling with these issues of discrepant geographies in a sustained and engaged manner, has made a substantial contribution in helping to think through these puzzles as well.

From its beginning the APT as an institution positioned itself to avoid a number of pitfalls, and sought new modes of understanding the Asian region: it avoided reliance on official national representation; was very open to critique, which was structured and invited through discursive platforms; and strove to create new curatorial modalities. All of these were innovative and significant positions in showcasing Asia, and when combined with the scale and ambition of the APT project, have led to a productive first decade. I see the APT itself as an ambitious agenda to track and promote contemporary art in a region that continues to experience dizzying social dislocation and indeed, nothing less than a thorough, world-historical transformation.

The APT began by mapping a handful of countries located in East and Southeast Asia, but did not rely on official representation. This may seem commonsensical today, when the notion of countries being showcased by official national representatives appears to be somewhat ridiculous, but one must remember that in 1993, this was not the case, and even today such representation remains firmly in place in major venues such as the *Venice Biennale*. The denial of official representation necessarily led the APT to conceive of other experiments in framing its goals. An institutional form that the APT adopted was the creation of a

critical and discursive platform as a necessary supplement to the exhibition, and this included publications, as well as conferences and meetings, many of which were contentious. The APT has been the target of sharp critique from a variety of positions, which has productively transformed its curatorial and institutional agendas. Furthermore, the APT wished to promote contemporary art in the diverse Asian region by also understanding and galvanising localised curatorial and critical work, rather than offering a panopticon vision centred only from within Australia. It partnered Australia-based professionals with localised critics and agents, a process that was uneven and not without problems, but nevertheless significant in its effort and reach.

APT1 was unveiled publicly in 1993 with the inclusion of artists based on a national framework but in which a relatively small number of countries were included. It quickly became evident that this mapping of Asia created a jigsaw puzzle-like cartography with numerous missing pieces, which not only created glaring geographic discontinuity, but also tracked visibility and privilege, despite itself. This began to be critiqued and remedied in APT2 in 1996, which included additional countries. By 1999, in APT3 much of East, Southeast and South Asia had been included, as well as a section of diasporic and peripatetic artists and practices under a “crossing borders” rubric. By APT4 in 2002, the need for a full map had attenuated, partly because of gallery space reorganisation, but more fundamentally, due to the very success of the earlier APTs in bringing much of Asia to self-visibility (but which still excluded Central and West Asia).

As a participant artist in the APT3 exhibition, as well as the associated conference held at its opening, I witnessed some of the tensions associated with the project and the justifiable critiques levelled against it, such as the over privileging of mainland Chinese artists in terms of space, resources and commissions over all others. There was also a sense of uneasiness for many participants, that the APT project was a way for Australia, a “white” country with erstwhile Europeanised pretensions, to attempt to exert a neo-imperial hegemony in a largely non-white region at a key historical juncture, when that region was finally beginning to rediscover itself. Many of these critiques were openly voiced and debated in the conference. Far more significantly, however, the opening and the ambitious conference provided a wonderful opportunity for a large number of scholars, critics and curators from across Asia to encounter each other's work. In that sense, the APT has served as an incubator for much of the energy and subsequent initiatives on contemporary Asian art across Asia and beyond.

The very success of the APT during the 1990s has however, contributed to a landscape where a comprehensive mapping is not as necessary as it was previously, when Asians simply did not know of each other's practices. Institution building in Asia today is still in its infancy, but things are clearly much better now than they were twenty years ago, so that the APT does not need to bear the sole burden of representing contemporary Asian art. With the establishment of museums in Singapore and Fukuoka, the work by the Hong Kong-based Asia Art Archives in documentation, and the increasing presence of Asian artists in exhibitions beyond Asia, the singular role that the APT played in its first decade is now being complemented by others. But given the enormous scale of Asia and the rapid growth of its contemporary art, the APT, with its outstanding collection of contemporary art, its rich archives and publications and its continued advocacy for Asian art, remains a vital force.

Finally, the APT has also been innovative in conjoining Asia with the Pacific Island region. Undoubtedly, this is due to the specific geographic exigencies and motivations of Australia. Nevertheless, for Asian artists, scholars and curators, it has provided a unique venue to encounter artists and works from the Pacific, a region largely consisting of smaller islands with far fewer resources for human development than many Asian countries. The presence of the numerous Pacific artists and their works was sobering and eye opening to me. It powerfully brought home the sense that even less developed Asian regions enjoy a hidden privilege that they refuse to interrogate. Many Asians still consider themselves victims of modern history, but in comparison, it is many of the Pacific Island regions that have been far more marginalised and subalternised.

The APT should be applauded for the major role it continues to play in showcasing and commissioning works from the Pacific region. And the lessons Asia-based curators and institutions might learn from this is to develop a keener sense of how marginality can be reinscribed as a form of power by those who see themselves as marginal. Asian institutions will need to develop greater humility in their self-perception towards the Pacific region, and begin a process of engagement in a respectful and supportive manner in a region intimately tied to Asia, yet frequently overlooked by its cultural institutions and thinkers.

Opposite: Rina Banerjee, *With or without a name she was blue and who knew when she would slip into another mood for her understandable unwillingness to do, to speak to, to feel and determine her next move rests in her nest as would a Refugee* (detail), 2009. Photo courtesy the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris