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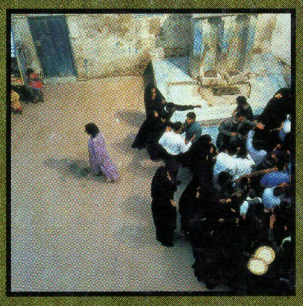

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Brazil Pakistan India: Contemporary Artists/ Historical Contexts

BY SUSAN PLATT

The enormous scale of the gilded Baroque altarpiece at the center of the exhibition "Brazil: Body and Soul" at the Guggenheim Museum is almost as overwhelming in a contemporary art museum in New York as it is in its Brazilian home, the church of São Bento de Olinda. In New York, however, it is only a giant defrocked wooden artifact propped up by wooden struts and, coincidentally, a perfect signifier of the transformation of the Guggenheim's historic commitment to the display of modernist abstract art as a spiritual endeavor into a thirst for globalization. But this globalization is only superficially about culture. Primarily, as for any good corporation, it is about the business of selling the Guggenheim franchise. The (as yet unconfirmed) word on the street is that one motivation for this exhibition was to lay the groundwork for opening another Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim in São Paulo.

Painting the Guggenheim's spiraling white ramps and atrium black and projecting flames on the ceiling only further underscores the literal materialism that now reigns at the museum. At the same time, the installation creates a bizarre and inadvertent echo of the flaming destruction of that other monument to the hopes (and hubris) of modernism, the World Trade Center. Utopian beliefs and "universal" meanings have long ago fallen into disrepute as a type of colonialism. Then came post-colonialism, diversity and multiculturalism. Now we have globalization, the new internationalism, which supersedes diversity and replaces local nuances with an international corporate culture that is manifested, in the case of art, as Biennial culture. But that corporate culture also needs a history, so along with the sponsorship of contemporary art is the sponsorship of historical exhibitions. Unlike modernism, which prided itself on starting anew from the ruins of World War I, these new corporate cultures want to have a history. They purposefully embrace the past as part of the present.

It is no surprise then that these days the hot new idea for the display of contemporary art is to pair it with historical art. In New York City, both the Guggenheim Museum and the Asia Society and Museum (newly renamed, expanded, and reopened) present contemporary art within an historical context, but the two museums completely diverge in their attitude to that relationship. At the Guggenheim it is a superficial device. At the Asia Society, it is part of a subtle intellectual exploration.

The Guggenheim's Body and Soul

"Brazil: Body and Soul" looks like the curator visited a Cost Plus for Brazilian art to buy wholesale supplies of ex votos, feather art, ecclesiastical hardware, mastheads, reliquaries, carved wooden saints, angels, Madonnas, crucifixes and oil paintings. The exhibition stimulates the same claustrophobic feeling as a consumer warehouse, too many things randomly accumulated and awaiting consumption. The ostensible point is to demonstrate that Brazilian culture has many different cultural references. Another claim is that the exhibition examines themes that are crucial to the Baroque and the twentieth century. None of these ideas comes through in the exhibition with the possible exception that Carnivale (presented by hard-to-see films projected in the stairwells) has influenced contemporary artists, not a particularly new insight. Contemporary art is at the "end" of the show (the works are on the sixth level or on the periphery of the main display areas). Rather than being enriched by juxtaposition to a context, current art barely emerges from the morass of historical objects.

"Brazil: Body and Soul" is divided in both the exhibition and the massive, unwieldy catalog into seven unevenly sized sections—The Encounter (which includes Indigenous Art), Baroque Brazil, Afro Brazilian Culture, Modern Brazil, Contemporary Brazil, Architecture, and Cinema. Baroque dominates with a bow to Indigenous and Afro Brazilian art in the first level of the exhibition. In other words, we have the usual positioning of artists who are outside the elite art world as somehow "earlier" in an unstated evolutionary scheme, regardless of when their work was made. A case in point is Mestre Didi. Born in 1917, he is a priest as well as an artist who is still making artwork today. His work, such as *Ancestral Spirit of the Tree* (1999), made of bundled palm ribs, leather beads and cowrie shells, combines traditional forms and improvisation. He is placed near the (also par-

Navin Rawanchaikul, *Tuk Tuk Scope, 2001, mixed media (photo courtesy the Asia Society).*

tially contemporary) indigenous feather art collection and some of the other Afro Brazilian artists like Geraldo Teles de Oliveira. Only two Afro Brazilian artists, Rubem Valentim and Ronaldo Rego, make it into the main modernist flow several levels later. They seem to have qualified because of their apparently cleaner abstraction, although the pioneering curator of Afro-Brazilian art, Emanoel Araujo, explains their close connections to the artists relegated to the "lower level."[1]

The exhibition misses the boat by not further foregrounding the idea that Brazilian modernists pioneered the concept of cultural cannibalism, or the devouring of the "other" as a means of independence, in the "Manifesto antropofago (Cannibalist manifesto)" by the Brazilian writer Oswald de Andrade. It emerges only briefly in Tarsila do Amaral's *Anthropophagy* (1929) in which two partial figures, a voluptuous woman and an emaciated man, together form an organic whole in the midst of a schematic two-dimensional jungle. The artist has devoured the ideas of Fernand Leger and *Le Douanier* Rousseau to create an entirely different expression. His model of absorption and transformation as a means of resistance was a model for Brazil's early twentieth century modernization, but it is also a potent model for the new global contemporary cultures.

In this context, the catalog essays (mostly by Brazilian writers) emerge as a crucial refinement to the exhibition's clumsy lurching. Although they too are almost buried under the physical and visual weight of the individual photographs of every object in the exhibition, and made even more inaccessible by the cost of the book, they provide sophisticated insights and historical perspectives that are not tainted by simplistic agendas or preconceived outsider ideas. Anthropophagy is concisely contextualized as a part of the modernist history of Brazil by Icleia Cattani[2] and further elucidated in an elegantly theorized article on film.[3]

An irony of the Guggenheim exhibition is that it seems to have borrowed its title from "Negro de corpo e alma," an exhibition held in São Paulo in 2000. That exhibition unearthed, through painstaking research, the major contribution that black and mestizo artists have made to Brazilian art. It constitutes a fundamental reconstructing of cultural history that would have been an exciting cultural breakthrough to use as a structure for the Guggenheim exhibition. Emanoel Araujo declares that Portuguese Brazilian art really emerged in the sixteenth century when slaves began carving the monumental altarpieces.[4] How much more exciting the Guggenheim exhibition could have been if it had pursued this theme as a central theme along with the idea of Anthropophagy.

But the shopping cart model persisted throughout the exhibition, even dominating familiar giants of Brazilian neo-Concrete art like Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, and Antonio Manuel, as well as current stars of the international scene like Vik Muñiz and Regina Silveira. Clark had what amounted to a mini-retrospective tucked away at the top of the exhibition, included some vintage films from her avant-garde performance pieces made with her Sorbonne students in the 1970s.[5] Her belief in sensuality and liberation as well as a new relationship to audience provided a welcome jolt of activism after all the saints and Madonnas. The fact that Clark's avant-gardism

and that of other neo-Concrete artists came out of the midst of the military dictatorship in Brazil that lasted from 1964 to 1985 is nowhere discussed in this exhibition. *That* historical context is carefully deleted in favor of the colonialist model.[6]

Antonio Manuel's room size installation, *Phantom* (1995), also comes from this context as it demands navigation through chunks of charcoal of various sizes suspended from the ceiling. The psychological threat of death and the need to escape refers directly to survival in a military state.

Deconstructing rather than unquestioningly celebrating colonialism is one subject of Regina Silveira's installation *The Saint's Paradox* (1994-98). A distorted shadow of a military hero looming behind a toy statue of a saint highlights the dark marriage of religion and conquest. That theme of the troubling relationship of religion, poverty and oppression is central to the work of Miguel Rio Branco. Muñiz spins the other way, by posing street children in the grand manner (after Velazquez et al.) and revealing its artificiality.

"Brazil Body and Soul" actually was an oddly paired celebration of colonialism and modernism, with a whiff of context. But the fault lies entirely with the Guggenheim, not the Brazilian sponsorship. The same organization, Brasilconnects, funded a simultaneous exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, which succeeded in all the ways that the Guggenheim Museum exhibition failed.[7]

Asia Society Conversations

In stark contrast to the shopping mall colonialism at the Guggenheim, the Asia Society embraces subtlety, transparency and nuance as it explores the relationship of historical and contemporary art as a series of layered relationships. The Asia Society is above all an intellectual institution. Art is seen as only one part of an educational endeavor that invites prominent people like Richard Holbrook, former United States Ambassador to the UN, as speakers. The art joins a larger audience and global context, by virtue of its location. The specific political relationships between the United States and the many countries in Asia are part of all the exhibitions.

In addition to this political context, the new design of the museum, with its glass staircases and carefully scaled galleries, invites us to think about the opening up of new relationships with tradition, the airing out of old ideas about Asia. Vishakha Desai, Senior Vice President of the Asia Society, has been a pioneer in building the contemporary art program there for several years. In honor of the newly expanded interior, she commissioned site-specific installations from nine Asian or Asian-American contemporary artists, organized three exhibitions that each have a different relationship to the contemporary world and included a symposium with the artists in the opening day celebration.

Perhaps her most radical decision was to feature contemporary artists who negotiate with the highly specific techniques of Indian

ygia Pape, *Tupinambá Cloak, 2000, mixed media, 59 by 315 by 315 inches (artist's collection; photo by Fernando Chaves courtesy the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum).*

"Brazil: Body and Soul" stimulates the same claustrophobic feeling as a consumer warehouse, too many things randomly accumulated and awaiting consumption.

miniature painting. Miniature painting is not a popular reference point among contemporary artists in either Pakistan or India partly because it is seen as medieval and decadent, the antithesis of modernity. Modernist or "urban" painters traditionally have preferred to explore rural folk traditions rather than those of the court. Miniature painting also corresponds to what the West deems exotic Orientalism.

"Conversations with Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander" presents two artists, one from India, one from Pakistan, who transform ancient miniature traditions, now overlaid with a highly conscious political history. The Mughal style, the art of a Muslim court, was a centerpiece of the Lahore art school after Pakistan was arbitrarily created as a Muslim country in 1947. By the 1980s it also became a new variant of anti-colonialism; Shahzia Sikander, a Pakistani artist now living in New York, adopted it as a form of resistance to globalized modernism. In addition, part of her training and her life have been in the United States, and that identity and present reality also comes into her work, creating yet another negotiation with local culture.

Opposite page: **Heri Dono**, *Flying in a Cocoon, 2001, mixed media, dimensions variable (photo courtesy the Asia Society).*

Nilima Sheikh, in contrast, is currently working in India as a direct heir to the early modernist Bengal school. The Bengal school adopted variants of miniature painting as a form of cultural resistance to the academic traditions of British colonialism at the turn of the century. Sheikh, who was trained as a modernist, adopts formal devices, compartments and borders, as well as the centrality of women from the Rajput miniature painting of the Hindu court. But these women are now contemporary women trapped in contemporary pressures.

In a lyrical statement, Sheikh and Sikander made banners that hang down three floors behind the transparent staircase of the museum. Their distinctive techniques and perspectives carry on a subtle dialogue. Sheikh's banner, *River: Carrying Across, Leaving Behind* (2001), is based on the India Pakistan Partition of 1947, and the nightmare of the population exchange between Muslims and Hindus. The intimacy and emotion of the figures derives from her own family's history with the Partition. Based in Lahore, Sheikh's Hindi family was forced to leave everything behind in order to move to India after Independence. The paintings also speak to the condition of present refugees in the current wars in Central Asia.

Shahzia Sikander's banner, as well as her other works on display, combine traditional detailed watercolor with computer manipulated digital printing. She scans the images from various sources, digitally prints them, then paints over the prints, creating a baffling intermingling of traditional and contemporary techniques.

The Asia Society also invited nine artists with various connections to Asia to create installations in the museum. Some of these artists were born in the United States but have an Asian heritage (Sarah Sze). Others still live in the Asian city where they were born (Xu Guodong, Navin Rawanchaikul). Likewise the commissioned installations vary in their negotiations with Asia. For Sarah Sze, Asia is a source of formal motifs. She invokes Japanese open space in her corner relief composed of her trademark inexpensive detritus like sliced up Styrofoam cups. Xu Guodong's work is part of a long tradition of Chinese "stonelandscape" artists, following the tradition of valuing rocks according to *wen* (grain), *li* (texture), *qi* (energy), *shi* (momentum), and *tai* (form).

Between these two extremes, the other artists demonstrate various relationships to both Asian and Asian American culture. *Tuk Tuk Scope* (2001) by Thailand's Navin Rawanchaikul, is a motorless (and luxurious) variant of the traditional tuk tuk, a three-wheeled group taxi used in cities and villages in Northern Thailand, the ceiling of which Rowanchaikul has painted with images from the streets of Thailand. Indonesian Heri Dono's *Flying in a Cocoon* contradicts both gravity and logic with his large suspended cocoons, which contain helpless angels who uselessly flap their mechanized wings. The metaphor appears to refer to hopes of freedom constrained by natural forces. On a long mirror wall outside the auditorium, Yong Soon Min installed *Movement*, a piece with 150 mechanical clocks. At their center are old LP covers for Asian and Asian American music groups. She is playing with the ideas of stereotypes (in the visual images on the covers), reality, reflections, and temporality, all at once. And, of course, because of the mirror, we also become part of the production of meaning.

Xu Bing and Vong Phaophanit explore language. Xu Bing's digital screens morph between English and his now trademark Chinese characters that form English words. Asking viewers for directions to the Asia Society, the screens curl around the wall beside the staircase to the auditorium, but they seem precious compared to Xu Bing's pre-

bove (left): **Regina Silveira**, *The Saint's Paradox, 1994, mixed media, 315 by 630 inches (Collection of Museu de Arte Contemporânea – USP, São Paulo; photo by João Musa courtesy Museu de Arte ontemporânea).; (right):* **Shahzia Sikander**, *Midgets to Monstors, 2001, digital output; and* **Nilma Sheikh**, *River: Carrying Across, Leaving Behind, 2001, casein tempera on canvas (photo courtesy the Asia Society).*

vious work. Vong Phaophanit, who lived in Laos until he was eleven, then moved to Berlin, and is currently a mainstream artist in London, created a red/orange neon wall piece, *Plantae lucum* (2001), for the new Garden Court. Laotian words spell out the Latin word for Asian plants. Written by his children, the words are softened and rendered even more illegible by dipping the neon in beeswax. Addressing the difficulties of language and communication, the piece is simply an elegant decorative sculpture, unless you have an explanation, and that is the point.[8]

Finally, the Asia Society invited twenty-five contemporary artists to select works from the Rockefeller Collection of Asian Art to display in "The Creative Eye." This third type of intersection of contemporary and historical art is also clean and straightforward. The artists (they range widely over the world), each chose several works and explained what the figure meant to them (with specific knowledge of the iconography) in a brief statement. The works came alive through the words of such contemporary artists as Bill T. Jones, Laurie Anderson, Chandralekha (dancer), Cheng Shi-Zheng (opera director), Ping Chong (theater director), Tan Dun (composer) Beth Forer (ceramic artist), Milton Glaser (designer), David Hwang (playwright), and Pico Iyer (writer).

Seemingly, the Guggenheim historicized contemporary art as a quick way to fill up the museum. "Brazil Body and Soul" fails as an exhibition because, aside from a few of the catalog essays, it does not engage with the subtleties of the present position of art in relation to culture and history. In contrast, the Asia Society acknowledges that these constantly changing temporal and global intersections must be examined by disrupting our former ways of thinking in order to create new and unexpected conversations. AP

Notes· 1. Emanoel Araujo, "Exhibiting Afro-Brazilian Art," *Brazil Body and Soul,* ed by Edward Sullivan, Guggenheim Museum 2001, p. 319. Araujo is former director of the Meseu de Arte da Bahia and currently director of the Pinacotaeca do Estado de São Paulo. **2.** Icleia Maria Borsa Cattani "Places of Modernism in Brazil," *Brazil Body and Soul,* pp. 384-385. **3.** "While Parisian surrealists had to seek out the exoticist delights of African masks, Tarsila... had only to evoke the memory of her Afro-Brazilian nanny, thus making exoticism quotidian and familiar." Robert Stam and Ismail Xavier, "The Baroque, the Modern, and Brazilian Cinema," p. 580. **4.** Araujo, p. 322. **5.** Agnaldo Farias, "Apollo in the Tropics: Constructivist Art in Brazil," *Brazil Body and Soul,* p. 402. For five years, Clark taught an experimental seminar intended to make the participants re-experience their bodies. **6.** Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America 1960–1980" *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s–1980s* Queens Museum of Art, New York 1999, pp. 60–62. **7.** "Virgin Territory: Women, Gender and History in Contemporary Brazilian Art" had four themes: the concept "virgin," mapping, Catholicism, and the mixing of races. Seventy-five artists engaged history through the lenses of these themes. The valuable catalog has a wealth of useful and straightforward interpretive material. Four artists appear in both exhibitions: Lygia Pape, Regina Silveira, Adriana Varejao and Miguel Rio Branco. **8.** A forthcoming catalog will explain all of these works in detail. This piece, in particular, has further meanings, including the fact that most of the plants in Central Park came from Asia and that the artist adopts plant references as metaphors for human migration.