

ART Asia Pacific

www.artasiapacific.com

a virtual region

maap.the virtual triennial
the icc biennale
cinemedia@federation square

online road trips

shu lea cheang
improbable architectures

everyday fiction

video art in korea and china

interactive interfaces

dumb type.malaysian electronic art
australian/nz visions.japanese avatars



new.media

Fizzle

The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial

It's a cheap joke, but one could safely say that had anything gone seriously wrong with Cai Guo Qiang's explosive installation on the opening night of the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT3), most of the contemporary Asian art community and the entire Australian art world would have vanished in one big bang. Thousands of artists, curators, writers and fellow art travellers lined the banks of the Brisbane River waiting for the long-anticipated firework event. But – in view of this thought, perhaps fortunately – the boats carrying the explosives sank, and the crowd was yet again disappointed (Cai's installation for the

beautiful – but the thoughtful and inclusive approach of its host institution. The result in past years has been an exciting, wonderfully random exhibition, full of revelations and challenges to our notions of what contemporary art is and how it should be displayed.

This last triennial, however, was a disappointment. Its faults can be summarised with two clichés: the road to disaster is paved with good intentions, and too many cooks spoil the broth. It was a decisively uncurated exhibition, but this was certainly not for any want of curators; at the gallery's own admission (how could they not see the ridiculousness of it?) there were forty-eight. Apinan Poshyananda dubbed it the ODT – the Over Diplomatic Triennial – and this committee approach in many ways betrayed the triennial's origins as a government-driven phenomenon. Indeed, there is something inherently disingenuous in this 'collaborative' approach, as QAG is not a commune, but a hierarchical, bureaucratic institution. (And, it must be said, while pursuing a 'consultative' approach QAG seemed at once oversolicitous and strangely deaf to the advice proffered.) The problem of APT3 lay firmly within the structuring of the selection process; one could not help but register various half-articulated agendas circulating about its flawed internal logic.

In the past the unsystematised nature of the exhibition was one of its great strengths. Various criteria were called into play in order to challenge the old hierarchies and to offer an alternative to the market- and fad-driven logic of most international art expositions. Yet for several reasons this approach no longer works. The great unevenness of the works displayed does not so much suggest alternative criteria for the evaluation of art, but that the country of origin has no good art to offer (which is not the case). One might argue that to use any criteria other than excellence is patronising, implying rather than a liberation from an outdated western avant-gardism a need for the sheltered workshop – affirmative action for artists of the southern hemisphere. The APT's official rationale is big on 'cultural understanding' and 'building dialogue' but short on mention of aesthetics or quality.



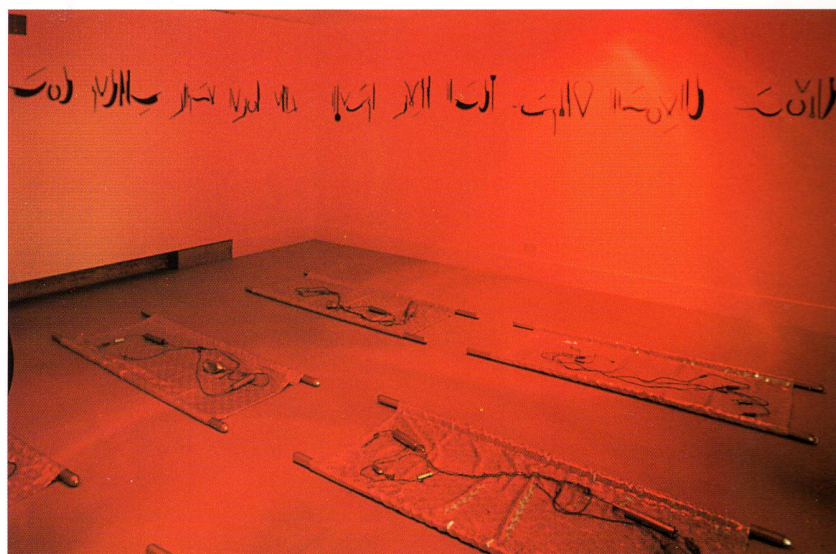
KIM SOO-JA, A Laundry Woman, 1999, traditional Korean used bedcovers and clothes, wooden pegs, wire rope, dimensions variable, collection the artist.

second APT in 1996 also did not eventuate, as the factory where his explosive materials were stored blew up). As an eminent Sinologist was overheard commenting, at least this non-event saved Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) from an unbecoming triumphalism.

In just six short years the APT is widely considered to have superseded the Biennale of Sydney as Australia's premier international art event. Its measure has not only been that of the art of the region – compelling, vital, often

The *Star Wars*-sounding title of APT3, 'Beyond the Future', did not augur well. Conference keynote speakers Geremie Barmé and Marian Pastor Roces did their best to convert it into some kind of sense, Barmé by looking at 'a future we have already met in the past', and Pastor Roces by entertaining analogies with the phantasmagoria of nineteenth-century world expositions. For me, Pastor Roces's paper was one of the highlights of the triennial (indeed it always feels like a privilege to hear her speak). Her paper centred on a vignette about a group of carved effigies displayed in an unnamed European museum of ethnography and attributed to the Ifugao, people from the interior mountain regions of the Northern Philippines. Although received, as it is presented, as an example of traditional Ifugao woodwork, this carving was most probably a maquette made specifically and uniquely for a universal exposition in the late nineteenth century. It is an object, she explains, that could only have come into being in the context of the international exposition.

The parallel with contemporary international art exhibitions is obvious, as the wildfire vogue for installation art has attested. For Pastor Roces, the form of the exposition itself, like our understanding of the notion of culture, relies on ethnographic notions of difference – 'differences forged in homelands' – leading to this late twentieth-century event 'an unreconstructed nineteenth-century inflection' (the issue of *National Geographic* on sale during APT3 addressed exactly this theme of 'culture'). In order not to reiterate the logic from which they emerge, we must see these objects for what they are. What is described is not nation or self but the moment of encounter itself: 'It is what we share that produces the differences between us, which in turn depends upon our interrelationships'.



above: **RUMMANA HUSSAIN, A Space for Healing, 1999**, installation, metal implements, PVC poles, cloth, plastic objects, gold paint, vermilion red paint, sound, dimensions variable, collection the artist's estate; below: **MELLA JAARSMA, Hi Inlander (Hello Native) 1998–99**, treated fish, chicken, frog and kangaroo skins, dimensions variable, collection the artist. Photograph Ray Fulton.

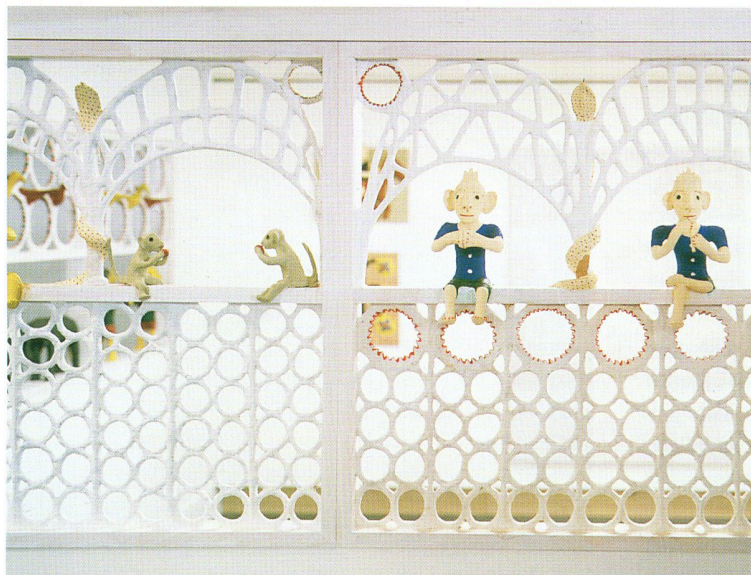
Pastor Roces's argument was subtler, less categorical than my account conveys, and indeed it is difficult to move the discourse on without being ambushed by terms like 'hybridity', 'globalisation', even 'difference' itself. The language we use to charter these encounters too quickly seems hackneyed, leaden, and it is only in the hands of such nimble thinkers as Pastor Roces and Geeta Kapur (who did not attend APT3) that we seem liberated from its intransigence. The scholar Yao Souchou suggested a teasing out of the nuances and hesitations from the liberal discourses – ones taken up with a heavy hand by the host institution, one might argue – and in her catalogue essay on Simryn Gill, Kajri Jain makes a plea for an anarchy of aesthetics in which the visual might speak, or act, for itself.

Much of the uncertainty underpinning the triennial has to do with the ambiguity of Australia's position within it. This was most awkwardly borne out in the Australian selection, which in APT3, as in the first triennial, seemed evasive, based on a series of shifting agendas. Gordon Bennett, Michael Jagamara Nelson and Karen Casey are indigenous artists (and the logic here perhaps was 'urban' artist, 'desert' artist and a woman); Helga Groves is from Queensland and has spent time in Asia on Asialink residencies; Guan Wei is a post-Tiananmen emigré Chinese artist; and Tim Johnson appropriates both Aboriginal and 'Asian' or Buddhist imagery in his paintings.

'Crossing Borders' was a substratum of the overall theme of APT3 and should have been



right: SONABAI, *Untitled*, 1999 (detail), installation, coconut fibre, clay, pigment, synthetic adhesive glue, dimensions variable, collection the artist; below: SHAHZIA SIKANDER, *Buoyant Fragmentation*, 1999, ink, gouache, synthetic polymer paint on tissue, collection the artist.



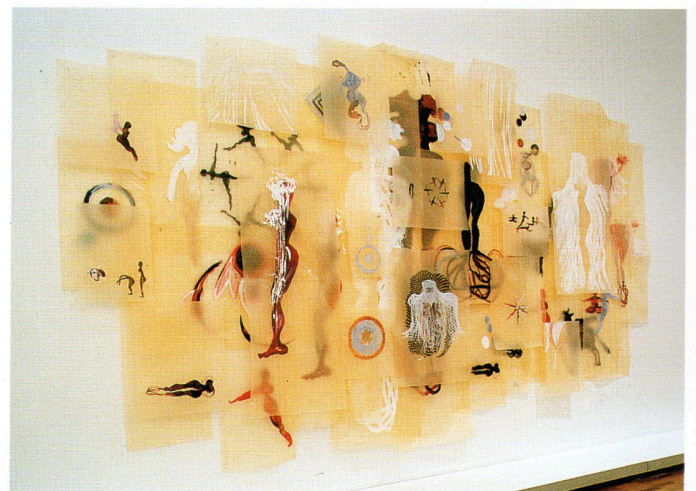
the title, and theme, of the whole exhibition. By negligibly apportioning only some artists to the 'Crossing Borders' category (Why Ah Xian but not Guan Wei? Why is craft a category that still needs to be breached?), the triennial confirmed the problematical platform of nation by labelling some artists as belonging to particular countries and cultures and others to a perpetual condition of migration. Simryn Gill, one of the artists included in 'Crossing Borders', toys mischievously with notions of the native in 'Vegetation', a series of photographs in which the artist's obdurate, tracksuit-clad figure is comically posed as various plants: a tumbleweed in Texas, a bird's-nest fern in Malaysia, and in Australia a xanthorrhoea, or 'black boy'. Interestingly, Mella Jaarsma, a Dutch-born Indonesian artist, was included in the Indonesian contingent, not in 'Crossing Borders' – a welcome complication of which there should have been more.

Outstanding works included Rummana Hussain's *A Space for Healing*, 1999, Mella Jaarsma's *Hi Inlander (Hello Native)*, 1998–99, and, I think my favourite, a room sculpted and painted by the Adivasi artist Sonabai. This 69-year-old artist spent two months in Brisbane, accompanied by her son, while she decorated a purpose-built room in the gallery with painted relief sculptures of birds, horses, trees and holy figures. Sonabai's art is part of what Gulam Sheikh has described as 'the highly visual language of the unlettered', an art in which 'user and maker are one and the same'. She has transformed the Rajwar tradition of house orna-

mentation with her whimsical originality; as Jyotindra Jain writes, 'her work does not merely derive from the inherited tradition but shapes it'.

Poised between a hospital room and house of prayer, Rummana Hussain's installation gathered a lamentable poignancy with the knowledge of the artist's death two months before the exhibition's opening. Lit womb-red, the walls of the room were inscribed with elegantly shaped tools resembling a nonsensical Arabic calligraphy; a series of empty hospital stretchers lay on the floor. In this work the artist addresses a rapprochement with death and with the communal violence that has riven India for the past decade.

Other arresting works included *La Chapelle*, 1998–99, an installation of cotton threads by Han Myung-Ok, *Povi Tau Vaga (The Challenge)*, 1999, the thrilling flaming bull performance of Michel Tuffery and Patrice Kaikilekofe, and Katsushige Nakahashi's *Zero*, 1999, a giant crumpled version of a model plane which describes the artist's alienation from the realities of the Second World War. One of the most edifying symmetries was found in the prevalence of the idea of the toy, and between various miniatures: in the exquisite miniature paintings of Shahzia Sikander, the quaintly comic versions of miniatures by Mohammad Imran Qureshi, and the tiny military effigies of Sri Lankan artist Tissa de Alwis. Like the sabre-wielding veiled women in Sikander's paintings, there was more potency in these tiny objects than in most of the exhibition's outsized installations.



One of the very best aspects of APT3 was the knee-high educational labels for children. The observation 'If you look closely you can see the shapes of their eyebrows' brought Ah Xian's porcelain busts eerily to life, and the suggestion 'Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be in someone else's skin?' captured exactly the gist of Mella Jaarsma's installation. The spectacular nature of many of the works, like Masato Nakamura's fluorescent McDonald's logos and Cai Guo Qiang's raining bridge, seemed designed for children's eyes, and the interactive and user-friendly nature of many of the works – such as Xu Bing's *Introduction to New English Calligraphy*, 1999, Surasi Kusolwong's *Ruen Pae (During the Moments of the Day)*, 1999, and Lee Mingwei's *Writing the Unspoken*, 1999 – provided a way of directly engaging the broadest possible audience. In this respect the exhibition was an unqualified success.

The great strength of the APT has been the tremendous strength of Asian and Pacific art itself. Where so much contemporary art seems to struggle with an innate vacuity, APT artists have demonstrated a necessary art, art with something to say. The APT possesses a unique territory and, rather than dithering about this great wealth, should heed its director's advice to 'Be bold'. The consultative committee approach should be abandoned in favour of vision – a single curator, or possibly a partnership between a curator from

QAG and an international curator. To date, the APT has been spendthrift, wasting the impact of important artists on single works; perhaps now is the time for a more extensive, ruminative approach. The triennial needs to be held together by ideas, not categories. Geremie Barmé's projection of 'a future in which we can be different in exactly the same way' perfectly described APT3's inclination to stick closely to a territory already marked out. Yet from its inception the triennial set itself apart from conventional models and values and does not need to reiterate its ordinary logic; presuming that the triennial is in fact ongoing, it will carry the seeds of its history within its continuity. To really get the fireworks going QAG should have the courage to let go of past thinking and allegiances and reinvent a triennial for the twenty-first century.

Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 9 September 1999 – 26 January 2000.

Hannah Fink

Hannah Fink is Co-Editor, with Hetti Perkins, of *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*.



MOHAMMAD IMRAN QURESHI, Presentation, 1998, gouache, gold leaf on washi paper, 25.4 x 20.3 cm, collection the artist.

Duplicitous dialogue

The Asia-Pacific Triennial 1993–99

Dialogue, 1996–99, the work of Japanese artist Shigeaki Iwai in the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT3) at Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) in 1999 consists of video projections of people from different countries attempting to communicate with each other in a variety of languages. Although one of the more modest works in the triennial, Iwai's desultory installation reflected some of the problems associated with dialogue and the translation of meaning between cultures. The losses and limitations of translations are well known, but what made *Dialogue* such a resonant work in the context of APT3 is the way it engages with the issue of dialogue, a concern that has permeated all three APTs. The framework of the APT has been prescribed

by notions of dialogue as a way of engaging with different cultures in the Asia-Pacific region. Yet an overview of the 1993, 1996 and 1999 triennials indicates that they have fallen short of their ambitions, largely because of the organisers' tendency to promote an idea of equivalence between participants and the invisibility of Australia as the frame of reference for the event. By not recognising the inherent difficulties of these exchanges, the triennial risks being accused of paying little more than lip service to these concerns.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the curatorial structure of APT3. The first thing that struck one when walking through APT3 was the broad selection of work. This was

[exhibition review]
AUSTRALIA