

Art in America

The cover of the March 2002 issue of 'Art in America' magazine features a photograph of several glowing incandescent light bulbs hanging from a dark ceiling. Each bulb is encircled by a bright blue neon light that forms a decorative, wavy outline around the bulb. The background is a dark, textured wall with vertical lines, possibly from a drop ceiling. The overall aesthetic is minimalist and artistic, reflecting the 'Arte Povera' theme mentioned in the text.

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ARTE POVERA
ROBERT ADAMS
ISTANBUL BIENNALE
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Asia Society Spotlights Contemporary Commissions

Tough Times Ahead

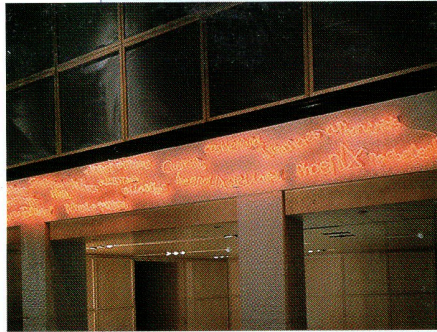
Though the epic art battles of the Giuliani era may be over, museums still have enormous financial hurdles ahead. Following Sept. 11, Giuliani called for 15-percent budget cuts city-wide. In early January, the *New York Times* reported that Bloomberg's new budget director sent a memo to all city agencies, including the Department of Cultural Affairs, asking for 25-percent cuts in their building plans over the next four years. The cuts will affect both city and private institutions that receive city money for capital projects. The *Times* quoted an unnamed arts professional who said, "any cultural institution that doesn't have a hole in the ground or a building partly up is going to find itself out of this budget."

Bloomberg's preliminary budget was due on Feb. 14, after this issue went to press. The day following his inauguration, Bloomberg warned the Lincoln Center board that its \$1.2-billion redevelopment may have to wait; Giuliani had committed \$240 million in city funds to the project. In 1998, Giuliani had pledged \$65 million to the Museum of Modern Art's expansion; \$35 million has already been received, with the remaining \$30 million expected over the next four years. Anticipating the cuts, MOMA is scaling back renovations in nonpublic areas and is considering other ways to cut costs. The Met was awaiting \$26.2 million to help double its exhibition space, and the Guggenheim, with its ambitious new downtown facility in the early planning stages, was expecting \$24 million.

Like dot-com dreams, the museum expansion boom may go bust, at least for a while. Yet Bloomberg seems to understand that the arts make good business sense, and that they are vital to rebuilding New York's economy. At least that's what the city's art world is counting on. —Stephanie Cash

A New and Improved Saatchi Gallery?

Since the Saatchi Gallery opened its doors in 1985, it has offered the British art world both inspiration and controversy. In the 1980s, it was one of the few places in London where one could see international



Vong Phaophanit's *Plantae lucom* (detail), in the Garden Court Café.



Xu Bing's video installation *Where is the Asia Society?*

the painful division of Pakistan and India in 1947. In spite of the banners' grandiose scale, the colorful, abstracted figures and landscapes featured in the paintings were inspired by Persian and Indian miniatures. Works by these artists are featured in one of the museum's inaugural exhibitions, "Conversations with Traditions," on view through Mar. 3 [see review p. 133].

Parked in the middle of the lobby is a curious little jitney, Rawanchaikul's *Tuk Tuk Scope*. This wildly decorated vehicle pokes fun at a principal means of transportation in the artist's native Thailand. In Bangkok, these stylized taxis often serve as showcases for works by Thai artists. This low-tech piece contrasts with two high-tech information stations designed by the Boston-based Small Design Firm, Inc., located nearby in the lobby. In these interactive, computerized displays, projectors suspended from the ceiling cast images on round fiberglass tables. Museumgoers can sit on stools and scan information about Asia, Asian art and the Asia Society.

Another high-tech piece, *Where Is the Asia Society?*, is the work of Chinese-American conceptual artist Xu Bing. It features a row of flat-screen video monitors hung along the banister of a curving staircase leading from the lobby to the lower level. Each monitor shows letters that morph from English to Xu's own invented language, "Chinglish." The words form phrases for asking directions to the Asia Society. Once on the lower level, visitors encounter *Movement*, a mural-size installation by Korean-American artist Soon Min. The work consists of dozens of vinyl records made into clocks and attached to a mirrored wall outside the auditorium. The work refers to the temporality of performance.

One of the most engaging installations is by Sze, an American artist of Chinese descent. Appropriately titled *Hidden Relief*, this sculpture fills an out-of-the-way corner off the third floor elevator bank. Made of found objects such as handheld yellow flashlights, measuring tape, wire and rulers, the intricate hodgepodge of elements seems about to peel away from the walls. Close up, however, all of the elements, most of which can be purchased in a hardware store, appear to be carefully arranged, as if following the rules of some otherworldly geometry.

In concert with the museum's re-design, the contemporary works on permanent display are effective in helping the Asia Society revitalize its image. In fact, contemporary Asian art figures prominently in the museum's new exhibition program. The museum, however, will continue to feature exhibitions of historical art, such as its inaugural show examining the Silk Road, "Monks and Merchants," [see p. 52]. In September, for instance, the institution will present a comprehensive show of contemporary aboriginal art. The museum is also organizing the first U.S. career survey of the late Thai installation artist Montien Boonma, set to open in early 2003. —David Ebony

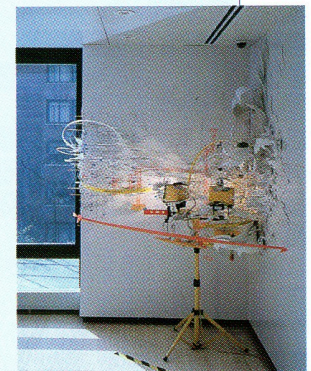
The Asia Society's renovated and expanded headquarters in Manhattan, designed by architect Bartholomew Voorsanger, recently debuted to glowing reviews. One of the highlights of the \$38-million project is the prominence of site-specific contemporary works by young Asian and Asian-American artists, Vong Phaophanit, Heri Dono, Xu Guodong, Shahzia Sikander, Nilima Sheikh, Navin Rawanchaikul, Xu Bing, Young Soon Min and Sarah Sze. The artists were chosen by a committee headed by Asia Society Museum director Vishakha N. Desai.

Shining above the café's entrance is *Plantae lucom*, a long, narrow relief sculpture in bright red neon by Phaophanit, an artist born in Laos, who currently resides in London and was a Turner Prize finalist in 1993. In this work, pulsating, wax-covered neon tubing forms letters that spell the Latin names of Asian plants. This radiant piece counterpoints Dono's *Flying in a Cocoon*, a delicate wood-and-paper construction suspended from the café's ceiling. Born in Jakarta and now living in Yogyakarta, historically Java's most important art center, Dono merges principles of Western art with those of the *Wayan Kulit*, Indonesia's traditional shadow-puppet theater. In the Asia Society café, Dono hung three large wooden pods from the ceiling. Peering out of each pod is a delicately rendered angel; the figures keep watch over the diners below. While relaxing in this room, visitors can contemplate *Lingbi Stone*, a sculpture by Chinese artist Xu Guodong, situated against a wall. The piece recalls an ancient Chinese scholar's rock.

Sikander and Sheikh, artists from Pakistan and India, respectively, collaborated on an atrium installation of two mural-sized banner paintings stretching vertically from the third floor to the lobby. The panels, one painted by each artist, hang side-by-side near the grand staircase. Thematically, the work centers on



Collaborative mural by Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander.



Detail of Sarah Sze's installation *Hidden Relief*.



Heri Dono, *Flying in a Cocoon*, in the Garden Court Café.