

The *Asian Modern*

It's time. Actually, it's way past time. First, it's time to decolonize. Next, to think past comforting national stories, which means to imagine the postnational. Then, to completely renovate the canon and at the same time give back all those precious stolen objects regardless of self-serving arguments about great art being the heritage of everyone, kept best in big art museums. After that, to recognize Indigenous sovereignty, to think about geography and to admit and apologize for whitefella history despite the friction and cost of recognizing diversity. And, alongside all this, to change bad old cultural habits that exclude and trivialize much more than half of the world's population.

And right on time, we have a set of competing new books and exhibitions that chart what art history will start to look like in the wake of these transformations. At the top of the list must be John Clark's *The Asian Modern*.¹ In this book, Clark realizes the radical and subversive intention that has for more than two decades been his aim: to urgently rethink and write meaningful regional art histories and as a result to be able to describe for the first time the panoramic sweep of modern Asian art from the perspective of Asia. (But let's leave aside for the moment that word, regional.) This has been an immensely, even wildly ambitious mission, one that had been presaged by his *Modern Asian Art*, which had systematized the study of modern and contemporary Asian art.² His approach blends anthropological and sociological categorizing with art history's attention to the specificity of paintings and a frequently astounding depth of sheerly historical research, invariably conducted in the specific Asian language required. The book comes with more than four hundred colour illustrations, each placed adjacent to where they are mentioned. This would be revelatory if it were not for their tiny, matchbox size, but I guess the alternative would have been a massive, coffee-table tome instead of this trim but still heavy handbook-sized volume.

The effect of Clark's book is to question and recast accepted wisdom about both Asian and Western art, both by more traditional-minded Asian scholars and by putatively progressive, ostensibly sophisticated Western scholars, including those involved in the now-global project of decolonization. He can do so by virtue of careful, often intimidatingly comprehensive scholarship and a polymath grasp of theoretical ideas outside art history, especially ideas and theories from social theory and cultural history. With my assessment comes a big disclaimer: I am merely a scholar of post-1945 contemporary Australian and Western art. I am not in any way a specialist in Asian art, even though I have been a constant, long-term visitor to South Asia for many decades. However, in Anthony Gardner's and my 2016 history of biennales and triennials, *Biennials, Triennials and documenta: Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art, 1955-2015*, we were ineluctably driven to trace the

¹ John Clark, *The Asian Modern*, Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2021

² John Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, Sydney and Honolulu: Craftsman House and University of Hawaii Press, 1998

histories of biennials of the South and of Asia.³ We found that we were often guided by John Clark's famous, open-access, online bibliography.⁴ We saw, wherever we looked in libraries and art museums, that Clark had been there before us, read everything in the original language and would be more than willing to share his knowledge not just with ever-widening international circles of ex-students but, as well, with ignorant colleagues like me, who have only just managed to quite myopically traverse our careers reading and speaking merely European languages. Interestingly, the complexity of the book in turn enables Clark to partly evade, under the cloak of dense, almost bewilderingly erudite thickets of new ideas and references, one piling on top of another, the otherwise abrasive appearance of going toe to toe with his peers within the art history and art museum discipline, even though that is the blunt implication of a careful reading of his new book. This means that even when critics are offended by his methodology, they recognize that *The Asian Modern* is a landmark book. At the very start of *The Asian Modern*, Clark writes that North American and European experts, art historians and curators alike, "believe that Euramerican modernism and its narratives are the story of modern art."⁵ A few pages later, he explains, "this claim, which is true in a rather simplistic developmental history, vanishes the moment it is accepted that modernity invents itself everywhere it is required for a new relativization of the pasts of any given culture or group of cultures."⁶ And so, with *The Asian Modern*, we arrive at the first methodical, chronological study of modern and contemporary art across the Asian region, and the first that refuses the modern and contemporary art history of Europe and North America, instead treating it—and this is not an exaggeration—with disdain and, sometimes, a degree of amply-deserved contempt. For as recent, slightly mystified reviews of *The Asian Modern* demonstrate, it remains hard for European and North American art historians to imagine a story where their regions are resolutely kept in the background, appearing merely in passing and not reinstated as principal or even supporting actors. For instance, in an otherwise deeply respectful review of *The Asian Modern* in London-based *The Burlington Magazine*, Mary Recinto wrote,

*Clark's frequent comparisons between historical events in Euramerica and Asia, a reference tactic that inexorably detracts from the discussions at hand. Still, it is difficult to fault Clark for this as, "The basic problem for the study of The Asian Modern, and perhaps for other kinds of non-Euramerican modernity, is how to escape the constraints of pre-existing Euramerican frames" (Clark, p. 67). In many ways, Clark succeeds in addressing this problem, but his insistence on comparing Asia to Euramerica alludes to the latter's enduring centrality. Perhaps an alternative vantage point less burdened by this correlation would allow space for further investigations into Asian modernity.*⁷

³ Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials and documenta: Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art, 1955–2015*, Boston: Wiley Blackwell, 2016

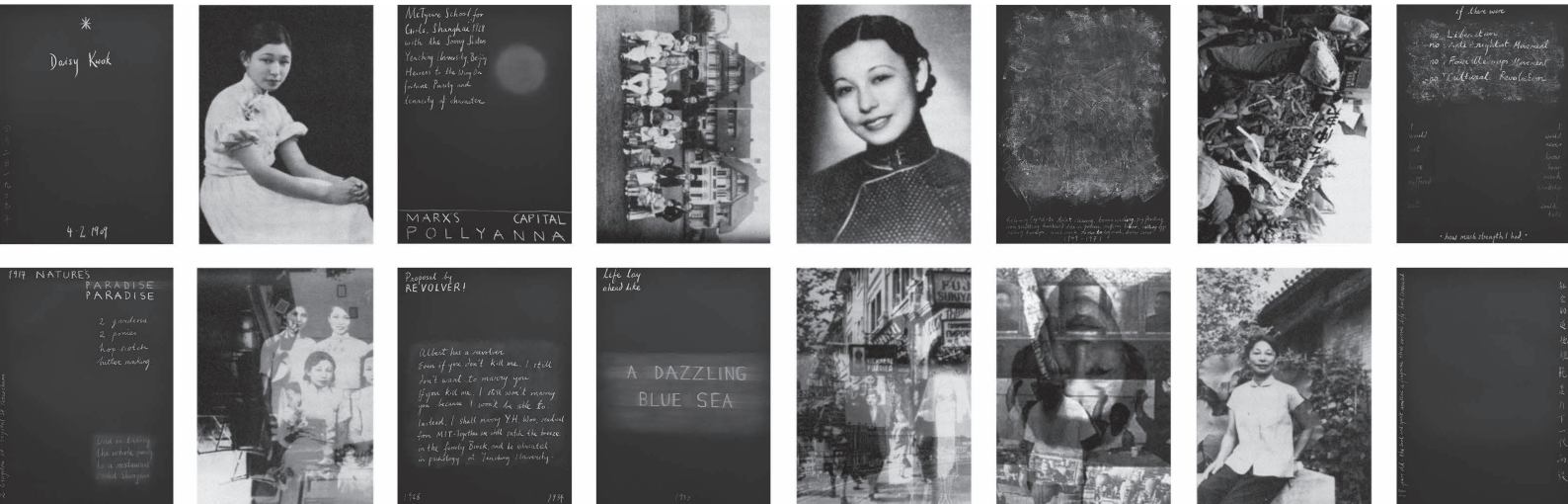
⁴ John Clark et al., *Modern and Contemporary Asian Art: A Working Bibliography 2011 Version*; <https://www.researchgate.net/scientific-contributions/John-Clark-2015261387>; accessed 29 April 2022

⁵ Clark, *The Asian Modern*, p. 8

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16

⁷ Mary Recinto, 'The Asian Modern', *Burlington Magazine*, no. 163, 2021, pp. 973–974, 974

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And in an angrier review in New York journal, *Art Journal*, Kevin Chua says,

Clark inherits a crude form of postcolonialism that is based on a strong opposition between Asia (or the 'East') and the West. While Eurocentrism has (rightly) been a battle cry for non-Westerners since the 1970s, one wonders whether the term's over familiarity masks deeper structural shifts in global politics and economy (e.g., the reappearance of economic and political hierarchies within and across cultures in the wake of globalization).⁸

I think Chua is completely wrong because he vastly underestimates and glosses over the survival of all the structural faults of the art history discipline and its deeply entrenched monocultural, Western bias. James Elkins spends a whole book convincingly explaining these in his indictment of current Western art history, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing: North Atlantic Art History and its Alternatives*.⁹ Elkins' erudite book should be required reading for all art historians and is *The Asian Modern's* necessary complement. He explains the weaknesses in North Atlantic-based scholars' and curators' attempts to think globally: they move in and around non-Western modern art *in order to* lead the reader to rethink contemporary European and American art rather than comprehend non-Western art. As Elkins writes, "The dissolution of the introductory 'story of art', as E.H. Gombrich called it, is impelled by interests in decolonization and identity, and by the ongoing introduction of unfamiliar practices into the art world. But as the art world is becoming more diverse and less uniform, writing about art is becoming less diverse and more uniform."¹⁰

⁸ Kevin Chua, 'Parochial Modernism', *Art Journal*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2022, pp. 118–121, 119

⁹ James Elkins, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing: North Atlantic Art History and its Alternatives*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7

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Of course, we now begin to see small shifts in the widening collection policies of a few international museums like Tate Modern and, further along the spectrum in Europe, with activist curatorial projects such as that connected with Arte Util (Useful Art), an idea usually associated with charismatic Cuban artist Tania Bruguera and with curator and frequent biennial director Charles Esche, the Director of the Van Abbemuseum in The Netherlands.¹¹ Otherwise, the astounding lack of curiosity about art beyond the modern and contemporary North Atlantic canon is always in evidence in symposia and conferences in Europe and North America. When an event focuses on a non-Western subject, participants are more or less relegated to talking to themselves. This is because art by non-Westerners, and women, is not regarded as the main game in town, an attitude huffily justified by the oft-repeated myth that sheer quality explains why we endlessly talk about (insert name of famous, white, male, North Atlantic artist).¹²

But why a pan-Asian investigation of modern and contemporary art across this vast and disparate region, from Japan to Australia to India and Thailand? (For reasons of space, no mention of the interesting cases of Tibet or Nepal.¹³) And, furthermore, why not divide these stories according to the generally accepted model of separating the study of regional art into national categories: of Thai art, of Japanese art, of Australian art, and so on? After all, that's the path that recent excellent books still take, for example David Teh's *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary*.¹⁴ Even to a non-specialist like me, there seem to be several reasons to depart from national boundaries. Part of the answer is that it has been through cross-national contact that otherwise apparently national art (and artists whose reputations remain bounded by nationality) unfolds. We miss or gloss over cross-national stories because there are few models from which to write this type of narrative other than in straightforward biography but, even though biographies of twentieth and twenty-first century artists might easily evade the constraints of national reification, biographies of artists almost always slot somewhere on

¹¹ On Arte Util, see <https://www.arte-util.org/>. Full disclosure from me: the office of Arte Util is at the Whitworth Museum, Manchester; I am part of a UK-based, AHRC-funded project led by Ana Carden-Coyne, working with refugees and NGOs to reshape the Whitworth and Manchester Art Gallery (MAG) with the full cooperation of both art museums, a project not associated with Arte Util even though the latter's office is at the Whitworth

¹² Three instances amongst a lifetime of bad memories: first, the 2022 Biennale of Venice Artistic Director Cecilia Alemani includes many women in her Italian Pavilion flagship exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams*, resulting in criticisms of the show as "woke". As *The Art Newspaper's* appalled editor Ben Luke recounts, "And yet it's Alemani's Biennale that is described by the *Financial Times* critic Jackie Wullschläger as 'absurdly gender-unbalanced'. Even worse, despite praising artists including Rego, Precious Okoyomon and Simone Leigh, she goes on to write: 'By choosing almost exclusively women, Alemani has paid a severe price in terms of quality, a cost obvious too in the contrast with many superb exhibitions by male artists across town'." See <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/04/27/the-women-dominated-venice-biennale-has-been-criticised-for-sacrificing-qualityrevealing-just-how-necessary-such-progressive-projects-really-are>; accessed 29 April 2022. At a far more sophisticated end of this spectrum, theorist Susan Buck-Morss asserts, "I may have become emotional in defending a project that is today quite unpopular, because it opposes ideas of alternative modernities, hybridity and multiculturalism. I am making a case for universality," continuing, "Of course, you do have to know the canon, otherwise you are dominated by it without knowing it... It is important to know about them because they are presumed as given by subsequent knowledge." Susan Buck-Morss, in conversation, 'Postcolonial Narratives', in James Elkins (ed.), *Art and Globalization*, Pennsylvania, PA: Pen State University Press, 2010, pp. 73–83, p. 93 & p. 81–82. Finally, at the 2013 Tate Modern conference accompanying 'Global Pop', a leading, New York-based art historian declared that a concern for quality should make us cautious of over-elevating the reputation of artists like Guyana-born artist Frank Bowling; see <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/global-pop-symposium>; also see <https://www.tate.org.uk/audio/global-pop-symposium-recording>

¹³ On modern and contemporary Tibetan art, see Clare Harris' simultaneously revelatory and frustratingly pedantic *In the Image of Tibet: Tibetan Painting after 1959*, London: Reaktion, 1999

¹⁴ David Teh, *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary*, Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2017

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a spectrum of hagiography, especially since most biographies are exhibition catalogues and these are always, and I mean always, congratulatory. So even though most artists are usually gathered under a national banner, they really don't fit, neither (English-born) Tom Roberts nor (Indigenous Australian) Yolngu Bark painters. Reforming art history requires understanding that modern and contemporary art emerged entwined in decolonization, war, and conflict, with courageous responses emerging in response to that collective violence. But world authorities within art history instead habitually default to the narrow perspective of continual, calm, tree-like growth that either privileges the perspective of the centre of the global art industry (for this in action see the paradigmatic *Art Since 1900*,¹⁵ the well-known myopia of which is dissected in forensic detail by Elkins in the memorable fourth chapter of *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing*), or consists of proud but brittle national histories bound up in reaction to that centre and creation of a national so-called School, as in Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting, 1788–1960*,¹⁶ the first edition of which deliberately excluded Aboriginal art.¹⁷

As we know, eventually the increasingly anachronistic *Australian Painting* was very cautiously directed through a crucial update for the third edition in 1991, though still conforming to the increasingly eccentric idea that art history could be written by excluding all other media except painting. A new writer, Terry Smith, was brought in to write postscripts at Bernard Smith's invitation. The idea—that Aboriginal painting should not be included as Australian art—was urgently remedied with a key 1991 chapter which now properly celebrated, explained, and integrated Indigenous painting as Australian painting. But even more than that, as my University of Melbourne colleague Professor Ian McLean definitively establishes, Indigenous Australian art has become Australian art and in turn has substantively displaced the icons of Australian art.¹⁸ The result, as Australian art historians Rex Butler and A.D.S. Donaldson convincingly argue, is that beloved, so-called Australian art such as the Heidelberg School (late nineteenth century Australian Impressionism) should be really regarded as British art, for it was made sometimes in Australia, sometimes in the United Kingdom, by expatriate, restless British artists.¹⁹

So how does Clark deal with these problems? In *The Asian Modern*, he sets out a loosely chronological sequence of studies of individual artists or groups, interrupted by reflections on what this shows. The book is divided into two quasi-autonomous sections, each of which would be adequate for their own volume. In Part 1 he traces Transitions to Modernity (1850s–1890s), Academy Realism and Salon Art (1880s–1910s), Early Modernism (1920s–1930s) and Transitions through

¹⁵ Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois & Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2004

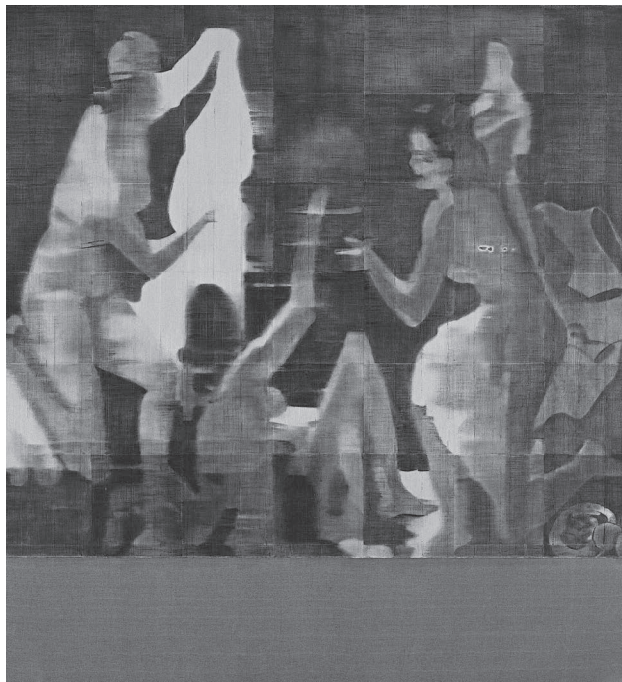
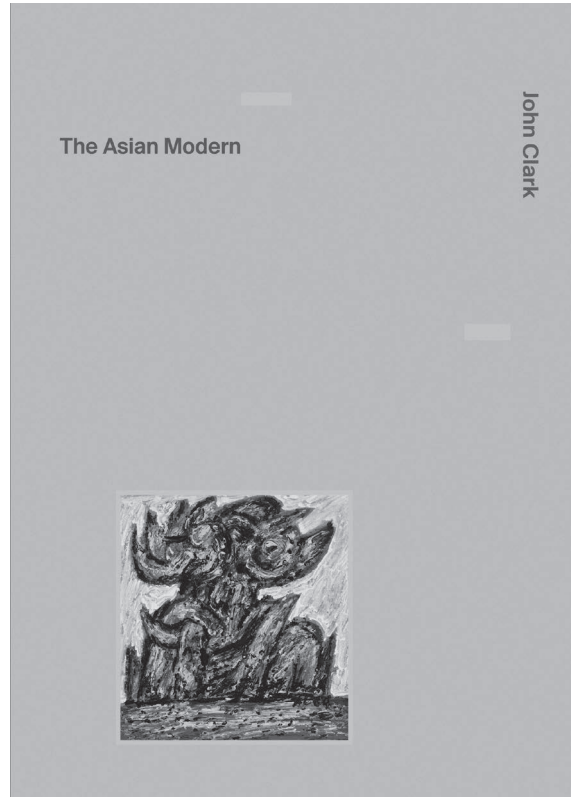
¹⁶ Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788–1960*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962

¹⁷ James Elkins, 'The example of Art Since 1900', in *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing*, pp. 95–112; also see, of course, Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* with its notorious, curt, complete dismissal of (Indigenous Australian) Western Desert painting; for critical reviews see Norman Bryson, 'Review: *Art Since 1900*', *frieze*, no. 92, 2005; also see Nancy J. Troy et al., 'Interventions Reviews', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 88, no. 2, 2006, pp. 373–89. See Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788–1960*; Bernard Smith and Terry Smith, *Australian Painting 1788–1990*, third edition, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991; in that edition, all the later chapters on art after the 1970s were written by Terry Smith

¹⁸ Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art*, London, Reaktion Press, 2016

¹⁹ Rex Butler and A.D.S. Donaldson, 'She-Oak and Sunlight: Australian Impressionism', *MeMO*, 5 June 2021; <https://memoreview.net/reviews/she-oak-and-sunlight-australian-impressionism-at-ngv-by-rex-butler-and-ads-donaldson>; accessed 29 April 2022

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World War II. In Part 2, he writes first about art in the long post-War period of Liberation movements towards national independences, then on Abstraction and Conceptualism (1940s–1960s), on The Contemporary (1980s to the present), and finally on Aleatoric and Fractured Spaces (also covering the contemporary period). If some of this seems to overlap, and if the several long bridging chapters appear repetitive and very difficult, then the effect of the whole is to firmly and definitively establish that there were plural, overlapping and often self-sustaining modernisms across Asia.

If I'm less convinced that the exact argument holds true in the latter sections of Part 2, as we move into the period of contemporary art, then I think Clark would agree for something else – equally messy, complex, and simultaneous and part of what Terry Smith calls “contemporaneity” – unfolds from the 1990s onwards. So, the Asian Modern, Clark explains, has continually engaged with multiple vectors of extra-national, postnational contingencies which are both inside and outside national boundaries: his key terms are exogenous and endogenous influences and forces, by which he respectively refers on the one hand to local causes, effects, events, and influences versus, on the other hand, to international contacts, impacts, and knowledge transfers. In effect, from the start of modern art in the nineteenth century to the present, artists appear within a matrix of forces. This matrix involves the two-dimensional intersection of two typologies or lists, one of which is the division of artists into eight types of artistic career possible on the spectrum from endogenic (the impact of the local) to exogenic (the impact of the international) circumstances, and the other is the division of Asian Modern artists into five successive cohorts or generations. It all sounds and looks both pedantic and heavy-handed, but such diagrammatic concepts – and such intensively defined discursive identities – come from the well-known and long-accepted models of structural anthropology with which Clark is very familiar; James Elkins sees evolutionary theory at work in this, as well.²⁰

The trouble is the language of our own disciplinary specialization. If we are art historians or artists, we are much less familiar with such jargon than academics working in film studies or cultural studies or anthropology. But these are merely navigational tools to explain, in Clark's words, the “siting of artists in art discourses.”²¹ The first type of artist never went abroad but was in contact with foreign art via examples provided, for instance, by patrons. One of Clark's examples here, near the start of his book, is the career of Thai mural painter Khrua In Khong, the heir to an immensely rich Buddhist iconography combined with the depiction of deep space, a breathtaking combination. The second type also stayed at home but mixed with expatriate Western artists or cultured foreigners: the astonishing Travancore-based Raja Ravi Varma is a famous example. The third type – one of Clark's examples is the great nineteenth century Philippines painter Simon Flores – also stayed home but was trained by foreign teachers in the studios and European-style art schools that were set up unexpectedly early (to the ignorant Westerner) across Asia. The fourth type spent short but decisive periods abroad in Europe or North America studying or in residencies: famous painter, Amrita Sher-Gil (popularly regarded as India's Frida Kahlo) is one instance. The fifth type, for instance Pan Yuliang, became long-term expatriates, never able to return home. The sixth type

²⁰ Elkins, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing*, p. 142

²¹ Clark, *The Asian Modern*, p. 23

were expatriates who moved back and forth from their new, permanent homes abroad back to their birthplaces, including Tom Roberts and Kuroda Saiki at the same time, or post-War Indian painter S.H. Raza. The seventh are exiles, the most famous of whom in our time is Chinese conceptualist/activist Ai Weiwei. The eighth and final type are Clark's cosmopolitans, not just returning home and travelling abroad but mediating between art worlds, including Indian painter M.F. Husain or Indonesian artist Heri Dono. Clark includes long sections on individual artists that represent the sum of his previous writing on certain artists, for example on nineteenth century artist Raja Ravi Varma, and other sections that are revelatory in their detail, such as where he focuses on great, Baroda-based painter Gulammohammed Sheikh. Clark always locates each artist within the wider, rippling circles of their many contemporaries.

Observing how, when, why and where each artist progressed, as opposed to constantly comparing them with cutting-edge European art and finding their art belated, is the great strength of Clark's book. He has long thoroughly internalized the antidote to what seminal New York-based, Japanese art historian Reiko Tomii calls the hole-digging fallacy: in her *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (2016), she explains the "Eurocentric equation of the centre-periphery with the original-versus-imitation paradigm," continuing, "Worse, since the centre would hold the authority to accord historical legitimacy, the margin more often than not relentlessly deployed the centre's discourse that it had assimilated and internalized."²² She illustrates this by pointing out that Japanese artist Yoshihara Mishio dug the earliest hole in late-modern art in 1956, eleven years before Claes Oldenberg's first hole-digging projects. She then reveals the coincidences, patiently explaining that "contemporaneity frequently manifests itself through similarity in form, idea and strategy... putting in perspective the presumption of the flow of influence from the centre to the periphery."²³

Connections can be obvious, especially since from the mid-1960s on, air travel was increasingly ubiquitous (and the critical demands both in 1960s Japan and then in 2000s China that local art be measured against international yardsticks were so insistent), but the resonances that we retroactively find are all too often wilfully dismissed as mere evidence of belated influence by arbiters at the centre or their local apologists. Instead, Clark obdurately insists on the transnational, lateral nature of contact and resonance between artists and across borders, refusing the blinkers that assume belatedness at the periphery and mimicry of the centre. The virtue of refusing continual cross-referencing between so-called centre and so-called periphery is that within his structuralist framework, Clark is set free to write about who artists were (where they were born, trained, who they knew and who they disliked), what they did, where they made their works and why. He does not linger on the centre's teleologies, not on what we should learn from these artists' works about our own political or moral struggles as almost all contemporary art writing tends to do, since looking for moral guidance from art has a very short shelf-life, no matter how worthy, and Clark clearly aims for the long view.

²² Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016, p. 18

²³ Tomii, p. 20

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Clark shows us multiple forces in action across successive chapters. He enumerates his lists and structures over and repeatedly, across the book and again in its Conclusion. Therefore, Clark can admit into his narrative both the nineteenth century European art training of Raden Saleh but also the non-radial diffusion of ideas from Asian artists to their friends and down to the next generation. This book, clearly, concentrates on artists and their careers. It is far less interested in exhibition histories—in tracking the appearance of cross-national exhibitions and residencies that brought together artists from across the region—though he has written at length elsewhere about Asian artists and international biennials. In more recent decades these have principally taken the form of triennials and biennials—of course, those at the putatively ‘old’ metropolitan venues like Venice but as well, and more importantly for Clark (and for me), in exhibitions from the late 1980s onwards, first at the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, then at the Asia Pacific Triennial, and immediately after at a host of biennials including the most important, the Gwangju Biennale. All these gathered artists and art from across Asia and they meant that a new aspect of contemporary art, the ascendancy of curators, appeared together with whole typologies of artmaking and exhibiting. Contemporary Asian art migrated from hermetic, avant-garde, and experimental origins into the realm of the spectacular, transcending specialist, insider audiences and garnering wide, global, public attention to contemporary art.

That is the first layer of Clark’s book. He goes deeper, explaining the shifts in the discourses and practice of modern and contemporary art due to the cataclysmic forces of European and then Japanese colonialism and imperialism. This is more than the usual rote observations by art historians about Western cultural imperialism and, even more depressing, radial diffusion of influence. This is about brute force and repression. In Australia, we have just begun to acknowledge these impacts, and this is largely because Indigenous artists and activists have generously shared their experiences with us. Clark writes, “For most Asian cultural discourses, the modern began with the relativization of the past provided by the historical break of colonial or neo-colonial rule.”²⁴ He continually reminds us of the fierceness of the forces of colonialism and imperialism, and of their dialectic with nationalist identity, placing artists firmly within the matrix of post-1945 national liberation movements. Then, in the later chapters of the book, he inscribes this within post-1989 globalism which he, and I, would carefully distinguish from globalization, which is much more multivalent. Even though art has engaged deeply with postnational forces, renewed configurations of national identity have continued up to the present as dominant discourses despite decades of art historians and postcolonial theorists around the world examining the assumptions of national cultures. National art still rules the roost inside each nation, especially in art museum displays of their permanent collections. There are a few exceptions. In Australia’s region, the National Gallery of Singapore (NGS) has gathered a host of great works from all across Southeast Asia together into a deeply inspiring permanent collection display but, even then, the NGS reserves a separate wing in its vast building to tell an exclusively national (and to an Australian viewer, deeply illuminating) story of Singaporean art. The NGS has done what our own National Gallery of Australia should always have managed: its displays weave a regional narrative.

²⁴ Clark, *The Asian Modern*, p. 19



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With this study of Asian art, Clark replaces the existing narrative of national art histories across Asia with sharper, micro-level stories. He neither leaves modern and late modern (pre-1970s) art locked in the past, nor does he lump contemporary art into an ahistorical and unchronological present, differentiated merely by morphology or form. In other words, Clark, like his friend and colleague Terry Smith, one of the other key art historians working today, writes the fifty-years-old contemporary period as proper history. And in this there is a historiographical background, one that Clark is clearly aware of, since he includes Australia in the category of Asian art (like Japan, at the edge of Asia, for both nations have an uneasy and sometimes queasy relationship with seeing their art as Asian). In Australia, we already know that those living beyond New York or London had often sought to escape the condition of being provincial artists or provincial art historians. This was, of course, the “provincialism problem” that Clark’s erstwhile University of Sydney colleague Terry Smith had defined in an essay of the same name in 1974.

As a very young artist way back then, I read the article at the time of its publication in the New York art magazine, *Artforum*, and I understood quickly how Smith had arrived at his bleak determinism which he summed up in the sentence, “as the situation stands, the provincial artist cannot choose not to be provincial.”²⁵ Smith had used this definition to explain and lament a model that saw the New York art world as the metropolitan centre, with all other art communities, including large, culturally autonomous, rich, confident cities—Sydney, Seoul, Tokyo, Melbourne—all viewed as provincial. And we have already pointed to supposedly definitive books, such as the notorious *Art Since 1900*, which wilfully ignored, trivialized, or dismissed anything beyond canonical North Atlantic avant-gardism. Clark explains that “international” or “modern” art would long insist on only including Euramerican art (James Elkins prefers the term, “North Atlantic art”, as do I) until the mid-1990s, and the North Atlantic still almost never admits parallel notions of non-Western or Asian modern art despite the “worlding” (a term that Terry Smith is primarily responsible for) of so many regional centres.²⁶ This—including the problem of how to write comparative art histories—is the problem with which David Joselit, the only senior member of the *October* circle with any interest in art outside the North Atlantic, grapples in his recent *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (2020).²⁷ Clark sums this up fairly definitively at the very end of his book:

Modern artists transmigrate between the levels of the state, notions of modern style that belong to them as artists, and often between quite specific sets of allegiances which allow the outsider to project authenticity onto the work of the artist. They also join in constituting the modern specific to their own art culture by greater contact with Euramerica under late colonialism.

²⁵ Terry Smith, ‘The Provincialism Problem’, *Artforum*, vol. 12, no., 1974, pp. 54–69; the essay is reprinted in Terry Smith, *Transformations in Australian Art Volume Two: The Twentieth Century—Modernism and Aboriginality*, Sydney: Craftsman House, 2002, pp. 113–121, 117

²⁶ On this and other unfamiliar terms, and on the shape of an history of contemporary art, see Terry Smith, *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2019; on the dialectic between the art industrial complex and deinstitutionalization, see Terry Smith, *Curating the Complex and the Open Strike*, New York: Sternberg Press, 2022

²⁷ David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020

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*That contact allows a new notion of customary artistic practice to be constituted as “the traditional,” both in resistance to the colonial, or to the presumed external centre in Euramerica, but also in an absorption of the customary.*²⁸

I have said that *The Asian Modern* privileges the stories of artists rather than exhibitions, but this is not completely true, for within his chapters and especially inside his copious footnotes Clark does explain in forensic detail the various tactics by which exclusionary stories have been maintained: the several famous bi-national exhibitions during the early 1990s in Paris were tools to compartmentalize nations; curators sought Japanese representatives of New York or European art tendencies. This means—and still does mean—selecting artists who mostly live in New York or exhibited in that city, or perhaps in London or Berlin, in the knowledge that the nation state and its institutions, including its art societies and then its art museums, became powerful so that traditional configurations of national identity underwrote post-independence art worlds across Asia and around the world underneath superficial levelling-up at places like the Biennale of Venice. The international art world’s premier showcases of contemporary art—the Biennale of Venice above all—still seem to provide opportunities for artists from around the world to show their work on an international stage, but in fact only within predetermined identities, within an atlas of the world in which the North Atlantic is central and everywhere else either marginal or completely absent. But this in turn ignores the long duration of survey exhibitions inside the Asian region, either focusing on painting in one nation, as did the Jakarta Biennale, or experimenting with ideas of the region, as did the Taipei Biennial.

What might we draw from all this? First, both Asian art and so-called Western art have always been metonyms for a much wider, all-pervasive, complex international system that has historically been in continual operation between and inside different national art worlds. Second, the value of art is socially constructed and regulated. Third, understanding the complexity of exchange is immensely important even though it at first appears pedantic, for it shows that artists and their works move in extraordinarily predictable and rigid circuits substantially dominated by historical, political, and state forces within which they still exercise remarkable agency. Fourth, Clark continually shows the role that imperialism and colonialism played in the formation of the Asian Modern, and he insists that this can be explored from an Asian perspective with conclusions that may also then be applied to the North Atlantic’s centres. What all this means, of course, is that the canonical modernity of New York and Paris was always merely relative. And it cut both ways. For Asian artists consecrated North Atlantic artists as well as positioned themselves through self-promotion for local canonization. In sum, *The Asian Modern* has the capacity to change our thinking and even revolutionize our perspective. John Clark shows us that, as far back as the 1850s, artist-to-artist possibilities, problematic political deals and often-tragic personal compromises ran through a modern and contemporary Asian art that unfolded with urgency, vivid surprise, and lapidary intricacy.

²⁸ Clark, *The Asian Modern*, p. 409