# Multi-Centred Modernisms—Reconfiguring Asian Art of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

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This section of *Transcultural Studies* features the proceedings of a lecture series entitled "Multi-centred modernisms—reconfiguring Asian art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries." The programme of lectures, which was jointly organised by the Chairs of Global Art History, Visual and Media Anthropology, and Japanese Art Histories at the University of Heidelberg, invited international scholars of Asian and Western art to address an audience composed of students, faculty, and interested visitors every fortnight during the summer term of 2010. Each talk was followed by a two-hour seminar session the next morning, in which graduate and advanced undergraduate students of art history and anthropology engaged in an intensive discussion with the speakers. The talks were structured with a view to revisit the conceptual category of modernism. The papers that resulted from these lectures will be published in this and subsequent issues of *Transcultural Studies* and, once complete, be regrouped as a volume also featuring an afterword and a selection of responses from participants of the seminar.

The aim is to foster fresh discussions on the subject of visual practices that have their roots in multiple European and Asian locations. Such practices develop visions of the modern by engaging local particularity with the universal—and in the process de-centre that universal. At a conceptual level, this enterprise begins by addressing a number of asymmetries that mark the historiography of modernism as a global process. Today there is a booming market for works of art produced by artists from different regions of Asia, including the Indian subcontinent, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Yet the academic discourse of modernism continues, to a large extent, to see the *avant-garde* as an art movement that originated in Europe in the late nineteenth century and animated artistic creations of the twentieth, during which period it also "spread" to the rest of the world. Because modernism has been perceived as a quintessentially European movement, non-European experiments have tended to get stamped with epithets like "derivative" or "mimicry," or "trying to be Picasso"—

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a syndrome that Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "being relegated to the waiting room of history."[1] Equally, Asian artists respond to the pressures of the global market and media discourses with an urge to self-orientalise. In the process they find themselves in a double bind wherein their art has to be modern and at the same time needs to bear the stamp of a national or cultural tradition, of "authenticity," so that it is still identifiably "Indian," "Chinese," or "Turkish." The compulsive need to establish such credentials is as powerfully sustained from within by the anxiety to reaffirm national identity in relation to the colonial past as it is from the homogenising fictions of contemporary globalism. Indeed, cultural essentialisms of various sorts are nurtured by forces that work in mutually constitutive ways, a subject addressed by Gennifer Weisenfeld in her contribution to this series.

Asymmetry is most visible in the museum scene where modernism becomes a glass wall that Asian artists come up against. Most metropolitan museums of modern art have not incorporated examples of non-European modernism in their collections. While in recent years a handful of these museums have acquired works of contemporary art from Asia, modernist experiments from the period spanning the early decades of the twentieth century—identified in the master narrative of art history as the most creative phase of modernism–remain absent from canonical displays. Even in the case of contemporary art, private galleries, rather than museums form the main spaces that accord visibility to works by Asian artists. As a result, the average museum visitor in the West associates Asian art with traditional forms that go back many centuries and which can be easily identified as expressions of "Indian" or "Chinese" or "Japanese" culture. Interestingly enough, certain genres, such as prints, break out of this pattern. For instance, a number of Japanese *Ukyo-e* prints from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that had made their way to European markets and influenced artists such as Monet and van Gogh do appear in museums today.[2] Yet, only objects that were produced before 1700 qualify as "high art" for Western viewers. Paradoxically, private buyers and collectors continue to invest more than ever before in Asian contemporary art. In addition, the recent proliferation of bienniales and other mega-exhibitions across the globe have ensured that contemporary art from Asia enjoys an unprecedented visibility and media coverage.

Such asymmetries have found their way into the canons of art history, which ascribe universal value to Euro-American modernism. They define the chronological signposts of modernism as corresponding to

developments in Europe and lay down certain hierarchies of genres and canons of beauty that exclude a range of visual media such as posters, advertisement, commercial film, calendar art, wayside icons, and urban statuary. While the triumphalist discourse of modernism has undergone critical scrutiny in recent years, the question of how to locate modernist art of the global South and East beyond models of centre and periphery, or dichotomies between the original and the copy, or tradition and modernity, calls for further exploration.

While the opening lecture of the series—delivered by James Elkins and published as an article in this issue—brought into focus the perspective of a Western art scholar on the tangled issue of "globalising" the discourse of modernism, the following talks undertook case studies from South Asia, Tibet, Japan, and China. Each one consciously engaged with visual practices beyond the metropolitan centres of the West and posed several questions such as: How is our understanding of modernist and avant-garde art practices reconfigured if viewed as emanating from networks of multiple centres across the globe, and if New Delhi, Bombay, Shanghai, or Tokyo were added to the traditional centres of Paris, Berlin, and New York? To what extent can we explore transcultural fields of artistic production as emerging from a multi-polar, yet entangled modernism, which was generated in Europe and beyond, and which often cut across the coloniser-colony divide to connect with critical currents that were also pan-Asian?

The interactions did not result in coining a host of modernisms—Indian, Chinese, Japanese—all understood as parallel streams that never meet. Instead, they can each be seen as a global happening, enmeshed with other modernisms, which allows us to question the extent to which such entanglements were constitutive for a Western avant-garde. Can European modernism be historically studied without situating it within the larger, complex political and cultural determinations of colonialism and global connections that made its emergence possible? In what ways did art movements of the "periphery" translate idioms that travelled from multiple centres in Asia and Europe so as to generate local styles and meanings that were no longer defined exclusively by the notion of tradition? On the other hand, to what extent did local styles and iconographies remain untouched by or resistant to modernist practices? In other words, in which areas of art practice was a global modernity evaded or bypassed, and was this a shifting process? Did such local practices destabilise existing certitudes about aesthetic value? What is the role of institutions that made up an expanding global public sphere for the arts—such as the art market,

art criticism, art museums, national, and international exhibitions? Under what conditions was there also a transfer back onto the global/international level of art flows, as the latest exhibition "The Third Mind" at the Guggenheim in New York suggested?

Furthermore, issues of artistic practice can hardly be dissociated from questions of collection, display, spectatorship, and education. How can we trace the genealogies of transnational art exhibitions today? What are the implications of globality for curatorial practice, how has it transformed spectatorship? Have modern media, the "society of spectacle,"[3] and the workings of the art market turned the spectator into a passive consumer of culture or can transcultural mobility induce a new form of spectatorial experience which is counter-hegemonic? In what ways do institutions, practices, and the art market impinge upon the agency of the artist? A number of these and related questions were featured in the concluding event of the series, a public panel discussion titled "Institutions, Markets, Publics—Contemporary Art Practice in Asia and Europe." It focused on the role of institutions that make up an expanding global public sphere for the arts: the art market, the role of collectors, transnational networks of artists, international exhibitions, and the role of art education and journalism. The panel included the following experts from various fields: Nixi Cura (Christie's Education Programme for Chinese Arts, London), Ranjit Hoskote (writer, critic, and curator, Mumbai), Uli Sigg (collector of contemporary Chinese art, Sursee), and Johan Holten (director Kunstverein, Heidelberg). The event, which was moderated by the author, can be viewed online at:

http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/news-events/films/filmed-events/panel-discussion-institutions-markets-publics-contemporary-art-practice-in-asia-and-europe.html

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1 For a discussion of these issues, see Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism. India's artists and the avant-garde 1922-1947 (London: Reaktion Books, 2007);* Partha Mitter, "*Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery,*" with responses by Alistair Wright, Rebecca M. Brown, Saloni Mathur, and Ajay Sinha, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 90 (4), 2008: 531-574.

2 We are grateful to Rudolf Wagner for drawing our attention to this interesting transcultural phenomenon.

3 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983).