

# Beyond the Imperial Gazes

/ Yongwoo LEE

*Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s* surveyed Asian art from between the 1960s and 1990s, a period where countries in the region were in constant social, political, and cultural turmoil while struggling to establish their own identities after the Second World War. The artistic practices of the period between the 1960s and 1990s unfolded towards radical and experimental directions, reflecting the chaotic social conditions of the time. Thus, the exhibition focuses on proving that such new tendencies were autonomously created by the artists from the period who had reconsidered artistic forms, themes and subjects of art, and the function and role of art. To elaborate such ideas, the exhibition was organized in four sections including the introduction: 'Questioning Structures,' 'Artists and the City,' and 'New Solidarities.' *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s* was co-organized by the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, National Gallery Singapore, and the Japan Foundation Asia Center. After the exhibitions in Japan and Korea, the exhibition will be presented at the National Gallery Singapore from June 14 until September 15, 2019. Yongwoo LEE examines the content and curatorial methodology of the exhibition and reflects on the limitations of exhibiting Asian art and strategies to tackle such limitations.

Lee Seung-taek, *Burning Canvases*  
*Floating on the River*, c.1988,  
Paint on C-print, 81.5×116cm

In the interstices between the 1960s and 1980-90s, a period of fast infiltration of modernization in Asia, we encounter a strange imaginary topography of Asia in interregnum where the region is not absent nor existing solely while not being completely alive nor dead. During the period between the 1960s and 1990s, most of Asian countries shared common experiences such as economic growth, compressed modernization, nationalism and nationalist movements, and the influence of the Cold War and anti-communism. However, Asia as a meta-discourse contains interpretive diversity which makes difficult to integrate into a singular theme with regards to different arguments on the periods of postcolonialism, the Cold War, the establishment of nation-state and modernization, and modernity and modernism. Thus, different discursive attempts made within the art scene to transverse the issue of 'Asia' have been disregarded as the almost incommensurable despite the fact that Asian countries shared communal experiences with much complexity.

*Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s* focuses on the similarities and differences that are constructed by these different spectral grammars on different dimensions. The exhibition seems to concentrate on tracing the cultural 'différance' of non-simultaneous, nondiachronic Asian spatiotemporality through indirect ways, rather than attempting to discover and/or redefine

the origin of Asian art as an identity. At the same time, it takes note on the fact that the illusory system of 'Asian art' has been residing in nonexistent / deficient curatorial methodologies while standing between the inevitably fictitious imagined community of Asia and the fiction of complete reality in artworks. (Thus, questions about the meaning of Asian art nor what theories and frameworks shall be mobilized to assess Asian art are valid in the exhibition.) Hence, the exhibition examines various preconditions on which modern and contemporary Asian art could be germinated, such as changes in social structures and systems, urbanization and how it felt to artists and their senses of affinity to the societies, different movements and its genealogies through shared memories and experiences. By doing so, the exhibition proposed a new exemplary frame through which the viewers can read modern and contemporary Asian art with more clarity in its form and concept which the history of modern and contemporary Asian art had been considered as something supplementary in the genealogy of transnational art history. In this sense, *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s* is ambitiously curated to encompass key artists from countries in Eastern / South Eastern / Southern Asia in order to investigate various artistic practices in Asia by "forg[ing] a constellation of connections and resonances ... forming multiple identities, contexts and relationships."<sup>1)</sup>



### 'Cultural Rewinding' through Asian Art

What has to be considered before arguing about the geopolitics of Asian art and society is the complex and problematic discussion on 'What is Asia.' According to Edward Said, Orientalism is not really concerning dealing with a general truth on the entity of the Orient. Rather, it is a perspective of the cultural representation of the Orient from the West which patronizing perceptions and fictional depictions of the "East" which is based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between the West and the rest.<sup>2)</sup> In other words, 'Asia' was created by the expansion of European colonialism and modernism since the eighteenth century, followed by the construction of system of knowledge on the Orient. In such a way, Asia has been considered as a subject that cannot recognize itself, always presented within the range that materializes dominance of the West and/or merely a framework used to categorize different societies and its characteristics. Therefore, Asian art after the 1950s, a period when Asia voluntarily and involuntarily escaped from the concept of Orientalism and imperial hegemony, can be considered as the modern departure for newly emerging Asian countries to decentralize the confrontational dichotomy between the West and the East through resistance and emancipation and to autonomously realize independence from and indifference to the West.

Yoshimi Takeuchi elucidated the notion of Asia as a 'cultural rewinding' in which the West can be transformed through the Eastern way, which is beyond the simplest conceptions of the East-West cultural discourse as the universal and the particular. The idea was articulated by the conception of 'Asia as a mindset' after the defeat of Japan in the Second World War, which was not the same as 'Asia as an ideology' that had been mobilized for the idea of "overcoming modernity" against the Western imperialism in the form of Japanese Asianism – which had taken the form of Japanese colonialism over Asia through concepts such as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and East Asian Cooperative Community.<sup>3)</sup> Taiwanese cultural theorist CHEN Kuan-Hsing appropriated a theoretical frame of Takeuchi's Asia as Method through which the sustained postcolonialism in contemporary Asia resists capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism after the Cold War discourses. CHEN argued that acquiring new universality – through the conceptual frame of self-reflective Asia as an intercultural critical compound against the Eurocentric modernism and cultural imperialism – ultimately leads to the possibility of multilateral Asian modernity beyond the hierarchal conceptions of



Dede Eri Supria, *Labyrinth*, 1987-1988, Oil on canvas, 207×227.5cm

Opposite page  
*Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s*, exhibition views at MMCA

1) BAE Myungji, SENG Yu Jin, SUZUKI Katsuo, *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s* (The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, 2019), p.13  
2) Edward SAID, *Orientalism* (1978)  
3) TAKEUCHI Yoshimi, "Asia as Method" in *What is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*. Translated by Richard F. CALICHMAN. (Columbia University Press, 2005)  
4) Kuan-Hsing CHEN, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Duke University Press, 2010)

5) Hasorno points out, "If Western curators or institutions want to see Southeast Asian arts, they always use their own criteria. They want to see Indonesia from their side," criticizing the exotic Orientalism of the West in their approach toward contemporary art in South Eastern Asian countries such as Indonesia. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2019/02/11/indonesian-artist-asks-what-would-you-do-if-these-crackers-were-real-pistols.html>  
 6) Boris GROYS, "Comrades of Time" in *Going Public* (Sternberg Press, 2010) p.90, 94

mimicry and admiration.<sup>4)</sup> In this sense, *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s* is a remarkable attempt to practice a cultural rewinding only through Asian art without presuming the West as a counterpart. At the same time, the exhibition unfolds Asian modern and contemporary art through a comparative cultural method that works beyond national boundaries and is based on the particularity of Asian art history.

Entering the exhibition, viewers instantaneously encounter three artworks which functions almost as a curatorial statement with regards to how Asian art after the 1960s shall be presented. The opening works of the exhibition are MATSUMOTO Toshio's *For the Damages Right Eye* (1968), Rajendra GOUR's *Eyes* (1967), and F.X. Hasorno's *What Would You Do If These Crackers Were Real Pistols?* (1977/2018), respectively created by artists from Japan, India, and Indonesia. With layers of moving images, MATSUMOTO Toshio projects the dismantled and subverted schizophrenic self-obsession of post-war Japanese society over flickering images, shown through the disruption of tradition and modernity, gender derangement, the influence of hippie movement over popular culture, and advertisement videos among others. At the other end of the scale is F.X. Harsono's *Cracker*, an installation composed of a pile of pistol-shaped pink crackers with a table and a chair on which the viewers can sit down and write down their own thoughts. The work raises a question on the violence that imbued the everyday life of modern Indonesians, which had been gradually going down under the spiral of silence during the Suharto regime that had taken pro-western policies with its anti-communist government. Hasorno, who led the New Art Movement as one of its key figures since its inauguration in 1975, has been trying to reconsider South Eastern Asian art on the basis of the universal category of the contemporary under the Western-centered modernist order.<sup>5)</sup> Seen between the two works is Rajendra GOUR's *Eyes*, a composite of found footage showing sociopolitical moments of the 1960s in Asia such as the Vietnam War. The trembling pupil in the video reads as a compulsive curatorial perspective and desire to encompass the contemporary art of Eastern/South East/South Asia through a certain discourse. In the meantime, the juxtaposed paintings by a Filipino artist Renato HABULAN and a Korean artist SHIN Hakcheol seem to insist that such particular histories can be the communal art historical foundation for Asia.

Among the many artworks and artists in the exhibition, how can we comprehend the shared experiences created by the intersection of inevitable turmoil that Asian countries went through in their modern and contemporary history? At this

Julie Lluich, *Thinking Nude*, 1988, Terracotta and mirror, 94×37×116cm

Opposite page  
 Huang Yong Ping, *Reptiles*, 1989, current version made in 2013, Paper pulp, iron and washing machine, 495×1300×900cm, exhibition view at National Gallery Singapore



point, we have to remind ourselves of Boris Groys' notion of new temporality and its relationship that are generated by repetitive video running in a loop. According to Groys, we are located in a place that is "a non-historical excess of time through art" in "the present as it reproduces itself without leading to any future."<sup>6)</sup> The first few works of the exhibition make me wonder whether it is an exhibition about artists' interpretation of Asian contemporaneity or a chronotology that reconstructs the fictional/spectral Asian art history that had long been functioning as an entity submissive to Western discourses.

After the initial works at the start, the exhibition is organized in three parts: 'Questioning Structures,' Artists and the City,' and 'New Solidarities.' Looking at the sections in chapters, one can sense that the exhibition is permeated with minute cacophonies of redefinitions of the relationship between ever-renewed Asian contemporary art and history, which is laid out by elaborate art historical methodologies employed by national museums of Korea, Japan, and Singapore, the tension generated by a nuanced topology of national museums of the former empire (Japan) and postcolonial nation-states (Korea and Singapore), and ambivalent postcolonial

desires reflected in artworks from the collections of three national art institutions of countries that are now recognized as developed countries – for example, the relationship of manifestations of colonial guilty conscious, anarchism, and avant-garde movements, visualization of political utterances that are seen within the solidarity appropriated by democratic rallies and Minjung Art, and the logic of subsumption and exclusion that is embedded in multi-dimensional Asian art historical styles that seem to partly borrow Western art historical narratives.

The first section, 'Questioning Structures,' focuses on paintings, sculptures and video works that appropriate television and media that employ everyday objects and bodily movement. Introduced in the section are works that took on avant-garde and experimental aesthetic experiments/practices, revolving around art historical actions that refrained from figurative painting and focused on materiality and abstraction in East Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan during the 1960s when Western concepts like 'modern art' and 'avant-garde' emerged as keywords in contemporary Asian art at the time. What these works prove – with regards to their Asian art historical meaning in relation to



their expansion of the boundary of art and change of structures – is that they require their viewers not just to passively look at them but actively comprehend and deeply reflect on their meanings. In other words, artists' rediscovery of structures initiated the progress and active engagement in ways of seeing in terms of how we appreciate art in a modernist sense, which in turn transformed the act of regarding art as presence into a will to proactively understand given artworks.<sup>7)</sup> 'Body as Media,' the most impressive sub-chapter of the first section of the exhibition, presents artists including CHANG Chao-Tang, ONO Yoko, LEE Kun-Yong, and KWAK Dukjun, focusing on collective memories induced through Asian artists' bodies and narratives about resisting the systems through subtle metaphors and movements.

The second section, 'Artists and the City,' deals with issues occurred in new independent Asian countries after the Second World War, caused by urbanism, compressed modernization, implementation of post-Fordism, and consumerist capitalism which was manifested through the emergence of popular media. The section raises questions on the issues of alienation and migration in the urban cities, art as an epitome of the spectacular industrial society, everyday cultures of different social classes that are driven by consumption, and changes in visibility, ultimately presenting the modernity of Asia. Key works of the section include KUDO Testumi's *Your Idol* (1962) which depicts a grotesque realism of humans mutated by radiation exposure, Jim SUPANGKAT's *Ken Dedes* (1975/1996), a sculpture depicting a figure of Buddha wearing jeans, paintings by OH Yoon, MIN Joungki, and PARK

Buldong who were members of Reality and Utterance, and Arahmaiani's *Sacred Coke* (1993/2016) in which the artist put a condom – a symbol of hedonism and pleasure – over a bottle of coke on top of a table for shaman rituals. Through critical reflections of artists, the section dynamically presents the desire for consumption under the rapid development of consumerist society (Vasan SITTHIKET, AKASEGAWA Genpei, MIN Joungki, OH Yoon, and KIM Jungheun), human alienation (Dede Eri Supria, Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam), and media politics (WANG Jun-Jieh, ZHANG Peili). In Asian countries, the rapid urbanization and modernization resulted in the reconstruction of the city as a kind of stage. Failure of Anpo demonstrations against the US-Japan Security Treaty and the united campus movement (*Zenkyōtō*) during the 1960s and the rise of anarchist rebellion after the emergence of hippie modernism initiated anti-art movements based on absurdity, notably Zero Jigen. Such artists strolled through the streets with their bodies naked, incorporating actors, protestors, and responses by passers-by into the city and the coporeality of performers.<sup>8)</sup> In *I Manning Myself Around* (1996), a recording of himself trying to reach a stack of notes hanging over his head from a stick attached to his body in Bangkok's banking district Silom, and *Top Boot on My Head* (1993) – another video showing the artist leading everyday activities with a boot attached on top of his head, generating certain pathos, Vasan SITTHIKET uncovered the precarious daily lives of urban dwellers who were fragmented and alienated among the mass and the consumer capitalism within which they lived.

'New Solidarities,' the third section of the exhibition, focuses

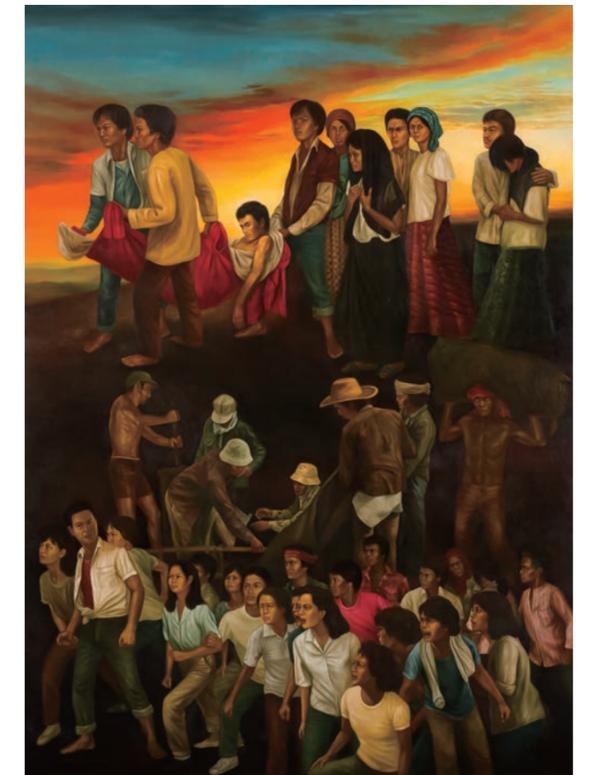
on the implosion of diverse political hegemonies and Asian modernity germinated during military dictatorships, democratic movements, and government-led modernization processes. Art in Asia during the formative period of national identities was a mirror of the society and cultural collective memory of those who lived through the period. During the period, interdisciplinary art practices across performance, theater, print, and music emerged. The solidarity between intellectuals and artists established a direct connection with nationalist/democratic movements in different Asian countries, giving birth to collective art movements. Entering the exhibition space for the third section, viewers encounter familiar images of new realism and popular art modestly depicting the exhausted life of the people in forms of prints, banners, and posters. The coarse traces of relief technique in wood prints by CHOO Keng Kwang, LIM Yew Kuan, LIM Mu Hue, and KOEH Sia Yong share similarities with such traces seen in works by HONG Sungdam who led the minjung art movement in South Korea during the 1970s and 1980s. The banners, paintings, and posters by United Artists' Front of Thailand present the progression of the Cold War politics, the student movement, establishment of dictatorial regimes, anti-imperialist and anti-dictatorship protests under the control of military authorities and corporate conglomerates. The section reflects on the meaning of a 'public exhibition' in which artists and students exhibited billboard cut-outs under the sociocultural changes during the 1970s and the question "For whom is art?" – a concern raised by Kahisahan, a Filipino artistic collective that strived to create art for the people. At the same time, it reconsiders the realism and basic elements of life pursued by people's art in Asia.

As seen in the establishment of Kaisahan in the Philippines and Reality and Utterance in South Korea in 1976 and 1979 as well as Place for People exhibition in India in 1981, the people's art in Asia asserted communication, participation, resistance, and politics, reflecting the self-examination and genuine assessment of modernism in the art scene and their perception of social reality through art. However, the third section of *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s* does not end at this point. The latter part of the section includes a sub-chapter titled 'Collectivism and Experimental Practices' which precariously connects the issues under a context of collectivist art and materialization of interdisciplinary genres without further explanations about how they built solidarity in what kind of networks. Other sub-chapters, 'Gender and Society' and 'Reinterpreting Histories and New Solidarities,' seem to have been added to the exhibition in a hectic manner while focusing on gender issues and feminist art movements

7) Jacques DERRIDA explains it as "hear[ing] myself (je m'entende) at the same time I speak." In other words, the act of appreciating art is expanded to "an absolutely pure auto-affection, occurring in a self-proximity" Jacques DERRIDA, *Speech and Phenomena*. Translated by David. B. ALLISON and Newton GARVER (Northwestern University Press, 1973)  
8) Established by Kato YOSHIHIRO and Iwata SHINICHI, Zero Jigen staged shocking performances with naked performers in central areas of Tokyo, including Ginza, Shinjuku, and Shibuya, in the 1960s. Japanese art historian KURODA Raiji asserts that Zero Jigen "regard[ed] the idea of performing rituals in the center of urban spaces ... the most important and signature place to perform." KURODA Raiji, "The Rituals of "Zero Jigen" in Urban Space" in *Artforum* issue 2 (2003), p. 36

Renato Habulan, *Drama of the Nations*, 1982, Oil on canvas, 213.4×152.4 cm

Opposite page  
United Artist's Front of Thailand, *Not Titled* 1975/2003, Acrylic on board; 4 billboards, 120×250cm (each), exhibition views at National Gallery Singapore





Kudo Tetsumi, *Your Idol*, 1962, Wood, iron, glass bottle, vinyl doll, injector, wax, hair and other materials, 85x67x15.5cm (detail)

Opposite page  
Zhang Huan, *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, 1995, Video, single channel, 4:3 format, color and sound (stereo), 6min

9) CHEN Kuan-Hsing, "The Imperialist Eye: The Cultural Imaginary of a Subempire and a Nation-State" in *positions* (2000) 8 (1), pp. 9-76  
10) Claire BISHOP mentioned that a way to realize contemporaneity to investigate multiple temporalities produced by museums can be practice by focusing on historical specificities. For BISHOP, the dialectical contemporaneity is asking about "why certain temporalities appear in particular works of art at specific historical moments." BISHOP insists that such a question leads to the foundation for a new political imagination. Clare BISHOP, *Radical Museology* (Koenig Books, 2013), p. 23

in Asian countries. (The sub-chapter includes a number of Korean feminist artists from the 1980s. Artworks by Filipino artists such as Julie LLUCH and Brenda V. FAJARDO seem to struggle for the increase of 'Asian diversity'.) It could have been better to relocate Nick DEOCAMPO's *Oliver* (1983), a film about a performer Oliver who play a Spiderman at a gay bar in Manila, from the sub-chapter 'Artists and the City' of the second section to 'Gender and Society,' a sub-chapter of the third section. It might also have been better if the exhibition highlighted Asian solidarity through a more diverse selection of works that convey different gender identities and queer voices.

#### Dialectic Contemporaneity of Asian Art

WANG Jun-Jieh and CHEANG Shu Lea's *How History Was Wounded* (1989) towards the end of the exhibition deals with the issue of Tiananmen Square protests, investigating how Taiwanese media and Kuomintang appropriated the political incident under the guise of anti-communist ideology for the sake of agitating the anti-communist sentiment among Taiwanese citizens and suppressing the significance of Tiananmen protests as a key democratic movement in the mainland China. CHEN Kuan-Hsing, who also appears in the WANG and CHEANG's video, defined Taiwan as a 'subempire' and asserted that Taiwan was subsumed by neocolonial imperialism under the hierarchy of global capitalism.<sup>9)</sup> Then, is it possible to assume that the boundary of cultural imagination constructed and designed by imperialism is still in control of the imaginary topos and subconscious of the colonized? Is colonialism in Asia duplicating and reproducing imperialistic cultural imagination by letting its counterparts – resistance and anticolonialism – endlessly repeat their limitation? The issue raised at the end of the exhibition poses meaningful questions on the limitations of curating an exhibition dealing with Asia with regards to the contemporaneity of Asian and the notion of historical anchoring. The issue of modernity in Asia cannot be interpreted without considering colonialism. But has the emergence of postcolonial/decolonial discourses not brought the postcolonial era but been revealing the permanence of continual colonialism that continues to intensify and change at the present? After walking out from the exhibition with these questions in mind, there is a batch of books and publications about contemporary Asian art, politics, culture, and history that are arranged on rows of tables in an open space between two exhibition spaces.

Is *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s*



an exhibition about the modern interpretation of Asian contemporaneity by artists? Or is it a chronotopological reconstruction of Asian art history that has been functioning as a fiction/specter under Western discourses? It seems that such questions are the very result of a singular curatorial method that permeates the exhibition and traces of considerations on the very method. Until now, so many exhibitions took place under different biennials and Asian projects, merely presenting genealogical arrangements of Asian artists and their works. In fact, such exhibitions read as modifications of hegemonies that have been produced by the politics of visibility within the Western art history and discursive categories, which includes the notion of Asian art in the 1960s and 1970s that has been germinated by the art historical turn on modernist discourses, the rise of the global art market and proliferation of art fairs, and the historical periods of the late 1980s and early 1990s following the fall of communism. In

contrast, *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s* does not appropriate a convenient method of chronological presentation under established discourses. Rather, it leads the viewers to discover the symptoms of modern and contemporary art in Asia by presenting the intersection of coexistence and connection within the non-simultaneous and diverse sociocultural modernities in Asia through the notion of non-diachronic temporality. In this sense, the curatorial methodology of *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s*, which shows that the multiple modernities that burgeoned in Asia cannot be presented as a singular genealogy, seems to be a valid strategy through which the contemporaneity of Asian art can be interpreted in a more dialectical manner.<sup>10)</sup>

Yongwoo LEE is a media historian and cultural studies scholar. He curated <Asian Diva: The muse and the monster> (2017, Seoul Museum of Art, co-curated) and served as guest curator for the 1st Anren Biennale (2017), and Para Site's <Soil and Stones, Souls and Songs> (2016-2017).