The Political and the Personal: Australia's Experience in Visual Arts Exchange in Southeast Asia through the 1990s

Alison Carroll
Founding Director, Asialink Arts

The focus of this paper is the two streams of the political and the personal, which interflow into something that might be called "culture." The paper evaluates what has gone well and what badly with Australian art exchanges with Asia, particularly Southeast Asia in the 1990s. It is clear that what has failed is political and what has succeeded is personal.

First, some context about Australia and Asia, as it is not widely known and it sets the scene for what will follow. Politically, Australia the nation is based on white settlement, or invasion if you like, in 1788, overtaking all existing structures. The new mix of cultures gathering in Australia was depicted around 1867 by Englishman J.C. F. Johnson in his beguiling painting of a European, a Chinese and a man of dark skin playing the card game of euchre on the Australian gold fields, fig.01 an image matched by others, including Indigenous artist Tommy McRae's similarly nonjudgmental drawing of a Chinese man, carrying his burden across his shoulders, wearing his conical hat and queue, alongside a European man in a high hat and waistcoat standing about with his hands in his pockets, and Indigenous men posing with their weapons held aloft. [01] Both images show a more benign situation than the very harsh reality of the day. Immigration from Asia was mainly Chinese gold miners, with the rare Afghan cameleer and Japanese pearl diver. The various colonies were federated (or brought together) as one new nation in 1901, the same year as the White Australia Policy was introduced, mainly directed at deterring Chinese immigration.

We had our share of mercenaries, missionaries, and misfits living in Asia through these years who often collected Asian art, which became the source of some excellent collections of historic art in our museums. [02] In World War II, Australians endeavoured to keep Japan from invading militarily, and then Communist China from invading ideologically, which extended to sending troops to fight alongside the United States in Vietnam through to the 1970s. World War II was a turning point politically, separating Australia from the United Kingdom and turning us more to Asia. The Colombo Plan of scholarships for students in Asia to come to Australia was instituted in 1950, a significant program at the time; gradually Asian languages were introduced to tertiary institutions—I learnt Indonesian in the 1960s—and, in 1966, the White Australia Policy was finally rescinded. In this period, our main arts funding and advisory program, the Australia Council for the Arts, was established. Then in 1972 the Whitlam Labor government was a new broom sweeping us towards a new future: Whitlam recognized the People's Republic of China, brought the troops home from Vietnam, and encouraged greater economic ties with Japan and our region. Then, the final cherry on the Australia-Asia political cake was Paul Keating, Prime Minister from 1991 to '96, making an overt policy that Australia's economic and cultural future was in Asia and that all moves in this direction would be supported.

Everything about visual art exchanges with Asia really started to happen then. The Australia Council under the Keating Government decreed that by 1993, fifty percent of its international budget would be for projects in Asia. The other funding partner, the Department of Foreign Affairs, also turned its clout to artistic exchanges with the region. State or in Japanese terms, prefectural—Governments have funds for the arts, and this, too, was turned to Asia. Even some local governments, particularly the City of Melbourne, put support into Asian art exchanges. It should be said that not everyone in the arts

responded positively or quickly. Our art museums had received exhibitions of traditional Asian art for many decades—"The Chinese Exhibition of archaeological finds"(1977), "The Sculpture of Thailand"(1976–1977), "The Art of the Japanese Package"(1979), "Japan: Masterpieces from the Idemitsu Collection"(1982–1983), and so on—but contemporary Asian art did not have an automatic welcome. I remember, in the 1990s, a senior curator at the National Gallery of Australia telling me that, if anything was going on in Vietnam, his dealer in Paris would tell him. Asian art departments in our major institutions are still, mainly, staffed by curators expert in traditional art, often uncomfortable with contemporary work. This is not unique to Australia—I suspect it has echoes in Europe, the United Kingdom, and, even, Japan.

However, outside these departments, in the 1990s, within Australian art circles more broadly, things really *did* change, with more exhibitions and projects about contemporary Asian art being shown in Australia, no longer separating Asian culture from immediate relevance. A pioneer event had been the Artists and Regional Exchange (ARX), coming out of the network of Contemporary Art Spaces, run from Perth, and by 1987 including artists from Southeast Asia. Then the Queensland Art Gallery started the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT) around 1991, leading to the first exhibition in 1993, with funds from the Queensland State government, encouraged by the mood of the times. Among the artists coming to Brisbane was Indonesian artist Dadang Christanto, making a major installation, *For Those Who Have Been Killed*, which captured everyone's attention. fig.02 The importance of this exhibition was immediately understood by the art world, with one critic writing, "The Triennial is the most important exhibition of recent art to be shown in Australia for a long time." 03 For culturally Euro-centric Australia, this was a big change. The magazine *Art and Asia Pacific* (currently, *ArtAsiaPacific*) started in Sydney in 1993. 04 fig.03 The first major exhibition of contemporary Chinese art seen outside China and Hong Kong, "Mao Goes Pop," was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney also in 1993. The Adelaide Festival in 1994 was devoted to Asian work, and included Thai artist Montien Boonma who made a place for individual contemplation between rows of fir trees in the Botanic Gardens. 05 fig.04 The political became personal and it was very successful. I look back on exciting times indeed.

It was the period where gradually Australian art started to be seen in Asia. Visual art institutions in Asia were starting to want to engage *within* the region—organizations in Asia began to accept residencies and exhibitions from Australia, and to want to co-curate projects. In 1994, the Australia Council was behind *Cultural Organisation in Southeast Asia*, a guide written by an experienced arts diplomat Jennifer Lindsay to give help to Australians who might want to understand working in the region better. fig.05 In 1990, I was also able to get funds primarily from the Australia Council and Foreign Affairs to start the Asialink program, which focused

fig.01

fig.02

fig.03

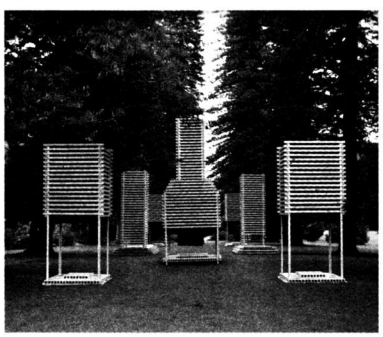

fig.04

01

Tommy McRae, *Untitled*, 1890, ink on paper, 20.2 x 16.2 cm, Collection of National Gallery of Australia. See http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=19166

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02

Herbert Wade Kent, merchant in China and Japan from 1905–1936, who gave his collection of Chinese art to the National Gallery of Victoria, is one of these. See http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kent-herbert-wade-10721 Obviously, the phrase of "mercenaries and misfits" is rhetorical—many of these people were motived by genuine interest and altruism.

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03

Joanna Mendelssohn, "Asia Pacific Triennale in Brisbane," *The Bulletin*, Vol. 115, October 12, 1993, p.107.

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I was the editor of this first trial edition, which included articles by Apinan Poshyananda, Leon Paroissien, Marian Pastor Roces, Tatehata Akira, Chang Tsong-Zung, Nicholas Thomas, and myself.

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05

The exhibition, "Adelaide Installations," under the umbrella of the Art Gallery of South Australia, included major commissioned site-specific work by Montien Boonma, Santiago Bose, Endō Toshikatsu, Heri Dono, Kim Soung-gui, Lu Shengzhong, Shim Moon Seup, and Roberto Villanueva.

fig.01

Joseph C.F. Johnson (Australia) 1848-1904, *Euchre in the Bush*, c.1867, oil on canvas, 42 x 60.2 cm, Collection of Art Gallery of Ballarat, Bequest of Clarice May Megaw, 1980.

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fig.02

Dadang Christanto, Performance and installation, *For those: Who are poor, Who are suffer(ing), Who are oppressed, Who are voiceless, Who are powerless, Who are burdened, Who are victims of violence, Who are victims of a dupe, Who are victims of injustice*, The First Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, September 1993. Photograph: Christabelle Baranay, Image courtesy: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

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fig.03

Art and Asia Pacific, Sydney, 1993, vol.1, no.1.

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fig.04

Montien Boonma (1953-2000, Thailand), *Room*, wood, cloth, area: c.19 x 8 m, Adelaide Botanic Gardens, Adelaide Festival, 1994.

at first on touring exhibitions and a residency program in Asia. [06] In the 1990s, we sent ninety-four artists to Southeast Asia (and many more of course to North and South Asia, and many more since). We worked with the premise that each individual artist would be best able to work with their peers through a local institution, so we set up arrangements with, mostly, art schools at first as they had experience of engaging with foreigners, and then spread from there. We did a lot of touring exhibitions from Australia, which were not so hard to do, but also collaborative curatorial projects with work from both places and touring to both places. These *were* harder to do and took longer to set up, but always were better in terms of engagement and outcomes. "Rapport" (1996) was created with co-support from Singaporean curators, artists, and funds; "Giao Luu (Confluence)" (1997) in Vietnam, and "Patterning" (1997) with input from Indonesian artists, followed by "Kawing (Link)" with regional centers of the Philippines, and then "Saisampan (Soul Ties)" with Thailand. We held an exhibition in Malaysia, "Sekali Lagi (Once Again)" in 1999, based on Australian artists revisiting Malaysia, all creating new works there, hosted at Rimbun Dahan outside Kuala Lumpur. fig.06 These Southeast Asian programs led us to other joint ventures with India, Korea, and, especially in the early 2000s, with Japan. Again, it was an exciting time.

All of these ventures came from people working together: talking to artists, visiting studios, and discussing ideas and concepts with curators and writers, getting institutions involved and raising funds. It was about people engaging. The two institutions I knew well, Asialink and the Asia Pacific Triennial, certainly had government backing, financially, and also, in the region, the support of our embassies and officials, but they worked because people who were committed to making things work got together.

I have five principles based on this, established at the beginning of the 1990s and remaining realities today:

1 *Artists* working in the region worked, and it worked for them. [07] Asialink regularly got four hundred applicants from individual artists to work in the region each year, for what in the end were forty places.
2 Partnerships worked. We tried to have equal management, equal finances, and equal work in each project—not always achieved with countries where funding was much less available, but even a small amount made a difference to the principle.
3 A general flexibility worked. That you do what you could to make something work as you think it should, then you went with the flow.
4 Keeping bureaucracy to a minimum worked. We had two-page contracts—putting down what is agreed for both sides and keeping it simple. Then we relied on trust. No contract will cover the gaps that happen in cross-cultural projects if you have no trust.
5 Relying on people like this created links that kept developing into the future. [08]

Overall this is an attitude of interest—being interested in the other culture, and showing it. However, in Australia since the mid-1990s, over this personal building up of relationships has hovered a political failure to continue the level of energy or thinking of the Keating government. A financial graph is an easy demonstration, showing the percentage of the international funding of the Australia Council for performing arts projects in Asia from 1992 to 2011. [09] fig.07 It goes down from fifty percent at the beginning of the period to ten percent in 2011. Recently Arts Victoria, the most advanced of the State bodies, stopped its stand-alone international program. Arts leadership in education is part of this, and I report, sadly, there is no expert Asian art historian teaching at my university, the University of Melbourne. In 2012, still, no performing arts tertiary educational institution in the country had a course which included Asian cultural practice in dance, theatre, or music as part of its core curriculum. [10] And, most important, we have no politically-supported structure to do better. We have no international arts agency; Japan has the Japan Foundation with an active professional arts staff, which is experienced and proactive in the region. We need the international arts experts to be given responsibility for this part of the agenda for the arts, not left in the hands of political or economic experts of the Foreign Affairs department, nor in the hands of

officers at the Australia Council who have little experience of working in Asia.

I have been asked to add my thoughts about Japan and Singapore in relation to Australia's experience in this arena, particularly in the 1990s when our political system did provide more support. My memory is strongly that the two proactive and financially supported countries in the region able to do this were Australia and Japan with, through the '90s, a parallel program of activities with the rest of the region. This was the same period as the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale started and the Japan Foundation Asia Center. There was a similar sense of positioning, both aware of the need to be more proactive culturally with the region.

We both were very aware of a similar sized "issue" in Asia to deal with, to live with, and for both of us, to live beyond—us for our White Australia Policy and our white Western, non-Asian cuckoo-in-the-nest status, and Japan because of its old arm's length identity with "Asia" generally and then its actions in World War II. It means politically motivated art ventures have this lurking in the background, even today. While the last thing I want it to say is these issues were positive actions in themselves, they do add layers of complexity to understandings, and I think that is not a bad thing: art was being used by both governments for political ends, but it gave opportunities for personal actions and engagements based on a more nuanced understanding of identity and place.

If there is an issue that the Singaporeans faced with cultural exchange, such as the White Australia Policy is for us, then it would the perception in the West, including in Australia, of uniformity, censorship, and a lack of democracy. That had truth in the 1990s, including an infamous censorship issue with an art event, and I so clearly remember the tension between the artist community, pushing against this, and the power of the government, really rather shocked by such rebellion. As a foreigner trying to set things up in Singapore, I remember having to deal with bureaucrats who focused, if not on censorship, then, on the economics—all arts ventures had to have a financial income attached. That was a problem for the sort of thing we were trying to do. But, through these years, Singapore really changed from within. The demands of those young, protesting students, artists, or whoever insisted on their voices being heard and, now, the openness of critique, the level of research into their past, their un-ending curatorial energy, their lack of colonial resentment, and their speed of response and adaptability, all speak of the political morphing into a new, creative, personally-rewarding environment.

Both Australia and Singapore are, obviously, predominantly immigrant nations: multi-layered groups of peoples of the world coming together in, by and large, a good-willed grouping. In Japanese terms, maybe these are difficult-to-define groups of people, with many allegiances to past lives and local ethnic groups under a wider Australian or Singaporean

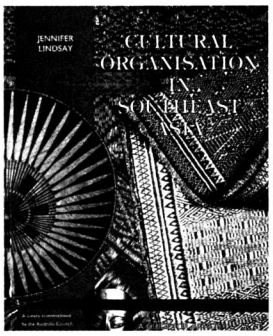

fig.05

fig.06

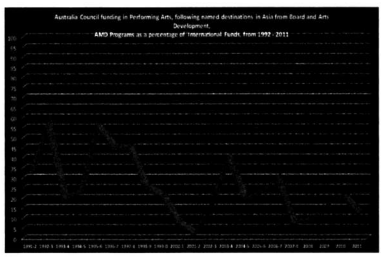

fig.07

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See www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/arts A fuller discussion of the program is given in "People and Partnership: An Australian Model for International Arts Exchanges—The Asialink Arts Program, 1990–2010," chapter 9, in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions; Connectivities and World-making*, ed. Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner (Canberra: Australian National University Press, Asian Studies Series Monograph 6, 2014), pp. 199-217. See http://press.anu.edu.au?p=298341.

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07

Asialink conducted a questionnaire in 2005 for past residents in visual arts, performing arts, writing and arts management. One question about the importance of the experience on their work had 86 percent reporting it was "extremely" or "very influential."

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Another part of the questionnaire asking about follow-up projects reported 93 percent of residents had continued with written contact leading to 54 percent having follow-up projects between the artist and their host country.

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This graph was published in, Alison Carroll and Carrillo Gantner, *Platform Papers no. 31: Finding a Place on the Asian Stage* (New South Wales: Currency House, 2012), p.52.

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Ibid., pp. 49–53.

fig.05

Jennifer Lindsay, *Cultural Organisation in Southeast Asia*, Australia Council, 1994.

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fig.06

"Sekali Lagi (Once Again): Australian Artists Revisit Malaysia," Rimbun Dahan, Kuala Lumpur, 1999.
Photograph courtesy: Asialink.

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fig.07

Australia Council funding for Performing Arts projects in Asia, as a percentage of "international" funds spent, from 1992–2011.

umbrella, coming together in very recent times. I like to think, though, that the idea of multiple times is as interesting here as multiple cultures—that for us, our short, two hundred and thirty years of immigrant society has been lived in fast time compared with slow, or—a term I heard recently—"deep" time in a culture like that of our Indigenous people, which looks back to the ancestors. Indigenous Australia has little interest in this Western Enlightenment compulsion of "forever forward." Australia's position in this discussion today, in Asia, in ourselves, and in our time, remains unsettled. Cultural commentators speak of the spaces between cultures as areas of uncertainty and discomfort, but also of energy and possibility. Australia is such a space, at least in the way it relates to those outside it.

Australia has sophisticated Western-based arts infrastructure, as does Japan, and much of the rest of North Asia. However, in those days, this did not exist in the visual art institutions in Southeast Asia, nor, for that matter, in South Asia. Hong Kong curator Oscar Ho has recently written about this succinctly, talking about Asia's , "under-developed infrastructure, conservative administrative cultures, prolongation of the colonial mindset, and Western cultural domination arising from the continuing imbalance of power and influence of curatorial practices that are led by Western thinking." [11] He questions whether this Western model of arts infrastructure is the most useful.

Certainly, the reality in Southeast Asia in the 1990s showed an alternative way of thinking. In fact it had been flagged in Australia by the engagement between artists of Southeast Asia through the 1987 ARX project in Perth, which was noted before. The top-down, Western-derived, government-supported institutions of Southeast Asia were resistant to change—even in the face of the general feeling through the region at the time that the art world itself was changing, and that opportunities were arising and exchanges were possible. It meant locally-relevant alternatives were created: artists groups, collectives, NGOs (or NPOs), private foundations, and small galleries bloomed. Art naturally made in the streets became celebrated in the street. So-called "popular art" was taken up with enthusiasm by all sorts of practitioners. The community ruled. I had thought at the beginning that gradually

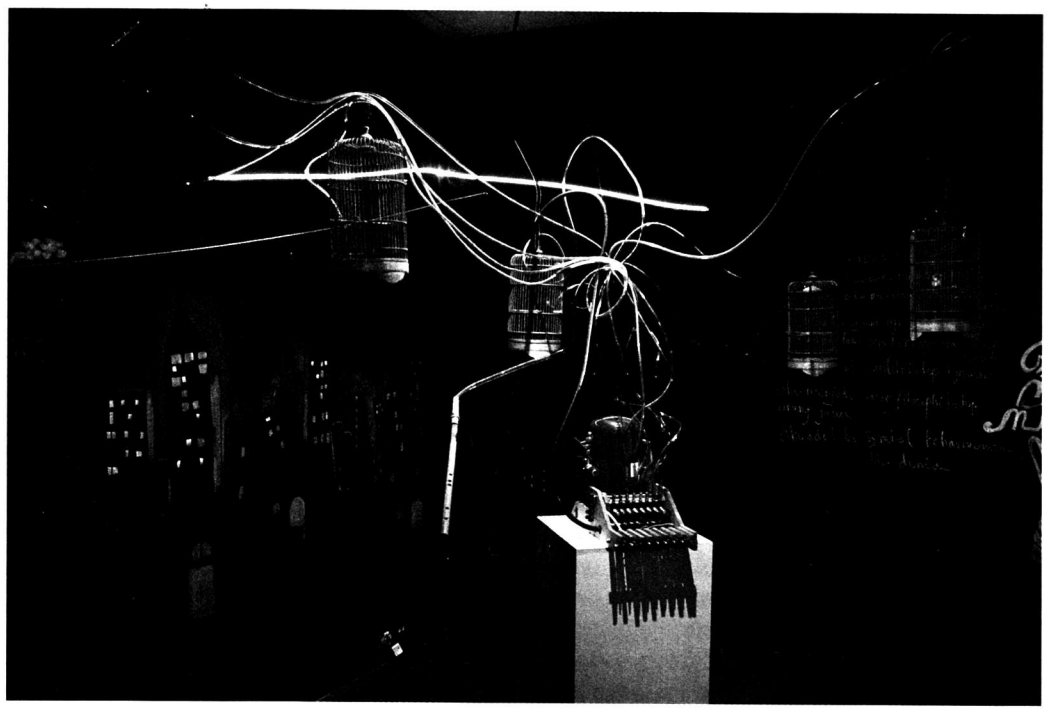

fig. 08
Dale Gorfinkel, Michael Candy and Wukir Suryadi (Australia and Indonesia), *Bird Organ*, mixed media from "The Instrument Builders Project: Collaboration in Sound by Indonesian and Australian Artists," National Gallery of Victoria, November 2014

I would gain more professionally-trained curatorial colleagues within the major institutions, but no, I gradually realized—against my will, really—that my new colleagues were everywhere else. It meant we, in Australia, had to be more agile to realign our thinking to this—not easy for some in Australia where the demarcation between the publicly and privately funded is fairly sacred. It is one of the areas that people in Asia can teach those of us based in Western thinking. Writers like Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincialising Europe* [12] and Kuan-Hsing Chen in *Asia as Method* [13] have been looking for new ways of thinking about the world, different sorts of knowledge systems, and intra-regional links.

One excellent example of this thinking, always there in Southeast Asian arts practice, was the Instrument Builders project recently in Yogyakarta and Melbourne. It was of young creative people building programs together, organically, across old media silos. It was full of inspiration, intelligence and creativity, and everyone—artists and audience—loved it. fig.08
A great example of another way was shown by Sugimoto Hiroshi in his exhibition "The End of Time" at the Mori Art Museum in 2005. As those who saw it would remember, he expected the audience to enter the work and walk through his series of spaces—like entering a literati ink painting and walking through that landscape. It enforced a different reality of time and space, and inner harmony, on the traveler through his world. It still resonates for me as an alternative to a Western-derived external, static or didactic museum display. It was noted before that our main museums have been resistant to changing their ways with Asian art. However, another example of a different way of thinking is the exhibition during early 2015 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, led by Suhanya Raffel, Deputy Director of that museum, from their collection. [14] fig.09
It puts contemporary and traditional work in marvellous dialogue. But, again, Suhanya is an individual driving a different agenda within that place, able to do it because of her seniority, and also her background and skill.

I'd love to see these creative, flexible, local, personal outcomes more around the region and the world. I'd love to see Southeast Asian countries thinking flexibly in terms of space as well: either laterally outwards, geographically, if they were so inclined, or celebrating their own internal, personal, and local interpretation of culture, presented in a thoughtful and positive way. There is no *one* way. I personally really like the Museum of Fine Arts in Hanoi, proudly introspective about its Socialist Realist collection.

Australia, Japan, and Singapore remain having among the most developed arts institutions in Asia, and there remains the desire from above to keep this internationally accepted professionalism flying high. An instance is the increasing number of curatorial and art museum training places in Australian tertiary institutions being for students from Asian countries. Against this, is the growing rejection of the model.

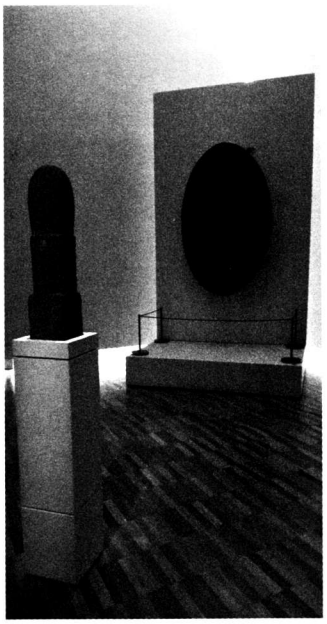

fig.09

Conversations through the Asian Collections, Art Gallery of New South Wales, March 2015. left: *Mukha-linga* (Cambodia) 600s-700s, stone right: Anish Kapoor, (India/UK), b. 1954, *Untitled*, 2002, stainless steel and lacquer

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Oscar Ho, "Under the Shadow: Problems in Museum Development in Asia," *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making*, ed. Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), p.180.

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Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007).

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Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

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14

"Conversations through the Asian Collections," curated by Suhanya Raffel, Deputy Director, and Justin Paton, Head Curator International Art, and the Asian curators of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2014–2015.