MUSINGS ON GLOBALISM AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

ON JANUARY 26, 2002, Kathy Halbreich, director of the Walker Art Center, and Vishakha N. Desai, senior vice president and director of the Museum at the Asia Society, New York, sat down to discuss the pitfalls and the grace notes of addressing globalism in one's institutional and curatorial practices. Following is an edited version of that conversation.

Kathy Halbreich: Some people think of the Asia Society as a culturally specific institution that focuses exclusively on traditional art. Since joining the Asia Society in 1990, you've been clear that it is, quite literally, a multicultural institution that highlights contemporary as well as traditional practice across the disciplines. Can you talk about some of the challenges of being involved in an institution that represents half of the world?

Vishakha N. Desai: It is interesting that even though the purview of the Asia Society covers more than half of the world, we call it "culturally specific" whereas institutions that typically cover Euro-American cultures are often seen as being "universal" or encyclopedic. Such perceptions are at the heart of how Asian art is received in this country.

One could argue that throughout the last century the ways in which the histories of Asian art have been told in the United States, and in the West in general, have tended to differentiate those stories from the present and from one another. When I began to ask why the study of Asian art so often excludes the twentieth century, I became increasingly aware of my own hybridity, which is also a reflection of the hybrid history of modern Asia. Clearly the study of this history, embedded in the history of colonialism, undermines the "purity" question that is equated with traditional Asian art.

KH: What is the "purity" question?

VND: Once you acknowledge colonial history, even for those countries that were not colonized in the twentieth century, the history of twentieth-century Asian art cannot be discussed without considering the intervention, influence, and hegemony of the West. It cannot be done. One of the things we've learned from the debate going on in cultural studies is that when you look at other cultures, if you keep them "pure" or "authentic," you also keep them ahistorical, nonchanging, static. But cultures can no longer be examined in isolation. The minute I ask myself, "Who am I? What composes my identity?" I realize that the privileging of Asian cultures as pure and as "other" is an ideological position that is not acceptable.

KH: I'd like to examine how art historians have tended to differentiate one culture from another, acknowledging neither the hybridity nor the perils of nationalism. But is it possible that one of the positive outcomes of globalism today is this sense of differentiation between and among ourselves, between and among our cultures, between and among continents, countries, and generations?

VND: I'm not sure it can be attributed solely to current forms of globalism. In Asia, it goes back to the rise of twentieth-century Asian nation-states and their desire to differentiate from the West and from one another. There is no way to talk about that without examining the specific political history of each country. The cultural discourse in many of these countries is extremely complex. On the one hand, there are strands that focus on what makes them different from the West, choosing to stand up for themselves by re-creating tradition, whether it is the mingei movement in Japan or the resurrection of miniature-painting traditions of the early twentieth century in India or ink painting in China. Simultaneously, the discourse pushes in the other direction, saying, "Wait a minute. Why are we being so conservative? We must also look at how we participate in the artistic practices of the world, because art knows no boundaries." Of course, these advocates also bought in to some Western notions about the authorial voice of the artist and other modernist trends, which didn't exist in most Asian countries before.

KH: How did that acceptance come about?

VND: Given the Western imperial or nearly imperial presence in much of Asia in the twentieth century, it would have been hard to avoid. Western forms and ideas were developed in Western-style art schools, whether in Thailand, India, or Japan. It couldn't have happened without the British, Italian, French, and Dutch influences in various Asian centers.

KH: These influences had a lot to do with the shift from privileging collective aspirations to honoring individual effort. How did it happen that rather than prizing the refinement and expansion of tradition, artists came to prize the "original" and the new?

VND: I can speak for India much more than for other places, but I believe the disruption of that collective sense was pretty dramatic, and coincided with the imposition of colonial power. It was violent in some ways. At the same time, however, you have to realize that in the early twentieth century the modernization process was equated with the advancement of a civilization, so there was a certain feeling of not wanting to be perceived as "backward." Then again, in China, it's an entirely different matter because the notion of individual artists goes back as far as the fourth century, long before the West ever thought about prizing individual achievement. People were writing about individuality and art theory in the tenth century, not just in the twentieth century. So the Chinese had this notion of scholarship around style long before anybody else did, including the West. Whereas in other parts of Asia, that's not true, particularly in India and in Southeast Asia.

KH: This gets back to the idea of this huge continent we call Asia, which for many in the West remains largely undifferentiated. There have been violent ruptures between countries that still linger today. There are religious ideas that separate as well as bind. You've just described something happening in China in the fourth century that didn't happen in Japan until much later. How do you talk about these cultural differences at the Asia Society? How do you interpret them? We can't assume that because one is Asian one understands all of these cultures. Here we are, at the Walker, trying mightily to bring work from various parts of the world back to our own community, recognizing that we are not scholars of any of these cultures. We are appreciators. We are perhaps slightly better informed than novices, but we're really just beginning to forge relationships. When you don't have representatives from all of these cultures on the curatorial team, how do you help clarify the distinctions not only for your Asian audiences, your Asian-American audiences, but for all the other audiences you have?

VND: There are so many different models. In my institution, there has been a history of utilizing guest curators, recognizing that no one person is an expert with a foothold in all of these countries. Interestingly, until I arrived on the scene, most of the curators were Western or American. I very consciously decided to seek out, whether in examining traditional work or contemporary work, curators who had practices based in Asian countries, partly because I wanted to change that voice.

KH: Were there curators in abundance?

VND: No.

KH: So what new strategies did you have to put in place to locate those curators?

VND: It comes down to time, money, and resources. If you make that commitment, you have to accept that it's going to be more complicated. It means that each project has to be initiated much earlier because it requires a longer gestation period. It means developing long-term partnerships with some of the curators so the work can continue to develop over time.

I'll use the example of our contemporary-art effort because, in a way, it's parallel to the Walker's global initiative. I'll never forget my introduction to the Galleries' academic advisory committee, the membership of which was in place long before I came to the Asia Society. The first thing we did was to rotate its membership because I felt a multiplicity of voices was necessary; but it meant changing the original structure in order to achieve that. I also remember the head of the committee—Sherman Lee, who was my mentor at the Cleveland Museum of Art—saying, "I understand you want to pursue contemporary art, but where are you going find the curatorial expertise? There are no experts." I said to him, "The fact that we don't know them doesn't mean they don't exist—but I take your point, which is that I first must find them." So before we created a program, I set out to find people in the field, especially in each region, who were doing the work. If you remember, you were part of that very first meeting. It took us a couple of years before we could actually identify the best thinkers because, especially in contemporary Asian art, it was still a relatively nascent field, even in Asia itself. Sherman asked an important question because it momentarily stopped me in my tracks, until I recognized that without giving it time I couldn't get there and neither could the institution. I can tell you that it has taken a full decade to get to a point where it is now an established part of the institutional practice to include contemporary art by Asian and Asian-American artists in what we do. Nobody questions it now.

KH: Have you noticed that your audience has changed as the programs have changed?

VND: Absolutely.

KH: How would you describe that?

VND: I would say that we have a younger and larger Asian-American audience today, not just in the visual arts but in the performing arts and other programs we do. It has permeated throughout the institution. Even if, in numbers, the contemporary audience is still smaller than our traditional audience, the effort is truly worthwhile.

You also have initiated a lot of changes at your institution. When you begin to contemplate these new programs, do you feel pressure to look out over a long horizon and imagine what the institution will be like ten years from now? With the Walker's global initiative, for example, what would it need to look like in a decade for it to be successful?

KH: When we began the initiative, I don't think I had any tangible idea of what it would feel like or how the texture of the institution might change. It was easier, perhaps, to think about it in quasi-numerical terms, for example, increasing the number of works in our collection from non-Western sources. Ideally, the composition of our curatorial staff will change some. Ideally, the educators who are helping us interpret the programs to an increasingly diverse local community will change some. I guess I realized that it would undermine certain traditional notions of expertise, but I don't think I articulated that. I might have put it in the form of a question. In other words, I knew that, institutionally, we couldn't become the final arbiters—or maybe we were the final arbiters but needed to draw information from our colleagues and experts along the way in order to develop additional criteria to make those final judgments. That was why we put this advisory committee together and that's why part of the role of our advisors is to critique our own programs. Philippe's exhibition Let's Entertain[1] was well under way by the time we began the meetings, and the criticism was pretty severe. But it was extremely

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1 Let's Entertain, curated by Philippe Vergne, was presented at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, February 12–April 30, 2000, and traveled through 2001 to Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon; Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg; and Miami Art Museum, Miami, Florida.

useful, and all of the curators took notice and began to inculcate sensitivities and knowledge, if not exquisitely detailed expertise, into their daily practice. As that project, and others, evolved, the thinking that was put on the table and the arguments we had and the questions we posed to one another became part of our daily practice. That questioning—the process of testing our daily assumptions—spilled into every other area. And, I confess, it can be exhausting.

But to get back to your question, no, I didn't have a precise tableau in my mind of what this institution would look like in ten years. Sometimes, I think that's a weakness because I really am profoundly interested in the discussion and I can't imagine where the process is going to take me until I'm at least partly on the way.

VND: The reason I asked is because if you had asked me the same question in 1991–1992, I could not have imagined the answer either. One thing I was clear about from the start was not wanting, ten years later, for the effort to be seen as "Vishakha's project." I wanted this to be the Asia Society's mandate. That's all I could imagine, just that much, in whatever way I could get there. It was not just about me. Even as late as 1996, I might not have been able to tell you that we were there yet. Today, I can.

KH: My experience has been similar, at least partially, in that I realized early on that my approach in trying to frame these larger questions was aimed at eventually shaping an institutional mission. That's really what we're talking about: institutional missions, institutional commitments. Maybe the three adjectives that appeared in our mission statement when we first rewrote it about a year after I came here are useful in the sense that they pointed the way: multidisciplinary, diverse, and international.

Even though we collectively, as staff and board, arrived at those three words by kind of intellectually duking it out, the struggle was fairly contained within theoretical arguments. I've come to realize that theory can be very scary to people because they miss the pleasure of seeing what the change looks like and feels like. Theoretical discussions of why we should become a more diverse institution or why, in fact, we needed to shift from using the word international to using the term global—a word we're now equally struggling with—always felt to some as a construct that embodied loss rather than opening up a bigger picture of the world. Once they began to see the rewards of the actions—the new audiences, artists, colleagues, conversations—they began to rest easier. It became exhilarating, full of openings rather than closure. But both trustees and staff need to be willing, and curious enough, to accept some diminution of their own authority.

VND: I want to come back to the multidisciplinary part of your mission. When you first started talking about the multidisciplinary imperative, was it out of a sense that all of these diverse creative endeavors needed to be represented, or was it that you wanted them to interconnect in ways that they hadn't before? Increasingly I'm much more interested in finding ways of connecting these worlds. It's not enough that all of them exist, but how do they coexist? What is the greater goal? Why should an institution have all the disciplines? And I'm taking about not only creative disciplines, but also policy-making, administrative, and educational responsibilities. Are there ways to articulate something that actually is much bigger than any one of these parts and to truly interconnect them?

KH: I've always watched artists very closely, maybe because I know how difficult it is, at least how difficult it was for me, to think and act as an artist, a practice that I found extremely lonely and gave up many, many years ago. But I never gave up the extraordinary revelations I found working with artists and being in artists' studios. Part of why I wanted to recalibrate the balance among multiple disciplines, which have been housed at the Walker for decades, had to do with watching how artists themselves were working. Artists increasingly became less interested in defining themselves as visual artists, moving-picture artists, or performing artists. They were interested in areas of convergence, which seems to me another way of looking at notions of hybridity. Even though I wanted to provide a fertile laboratory setting for artists, I was equally interested in creating opportunities for audiences, which still, by and large, define their interests by discipline. I wanted to encourage them to move out of those disciplinary silos toward a larger set of ideas about what the work means, where it comes from, how it is framed, and how the disciplinary boundaries are shifting in the twenty-first century. So it had to do with my commitment to both artists and audiences.

The choice of the term multidisciplinary, as opposed to interdisciplinary, is in itself revealing. We found compelling reasons for leaving the door open for interdisciplinary actions, or the blending of disciplines, while maintaining the possibility of doing the very best disciplinary work. That's why we chose the concept of "multi" over the concept of "inter," which seemed to suggest a trap in which all work would have to cross these borders, and we didn't believe that was true or necessary.

I'm beginning to see how these ideas of convergence and in-between spaces as alternatives to traditional canonical definitions and distinctions might have stemmed from what I still like to think of as the very fertile soil of globalism, recognizing that some of those fields are also very polluted.

VND: I was just going to go there. When we talk about international versus global, it is not unlike talking about multiple disciplines versus interdisciplines. The problem with globalism is that sometimes people look at it as if it were only interdisciplinary, whereby all elements must intersect. We need to make a distinction between early internationalism and current globalization. You could be internationalist, but from an import/export model—lots of things coming together from different parts of the world, like pavilions at a world's fair. Globalization, to some extent, doesn't allow that model because it forces you to ask, "But where are the connecting points?" On the other hand, if you look only at the interconnectivity, without seeing the cultural specificity that underlies each of those connecting points, then something is lost as well. So how can we arrive at a definition of the globalizing phenomenon that will allow for both the reach of latitudinal, across-the-world connection and the depth that comes from the specificity of a time and a place? The in-betweenness is what interests me. It's not about an either/or paradigm, but one that includes both.

KH: Let's be simplistic, for a moment. How would you define internationalism, and then how would you define globalism?

VND: For me—in elementary terms—internationalism implies that you look at the world and you bring it over. If you go back to the end of World War I and to the establishment of the League of Nations, that period was all about international cooperation and representation. The phenomenon of globalism, however, particularly in the latter two decades of the twentieth century and now into the twenty-first century, is about the messiness of how all these worlds connect, or stay apart.

KH: Let's look for a moment at the simple equation of globalism=interconnectivity, and the question of when globalism actually began.

VND: So much of it has to do with when the literature began to pick up on this word and who started writing about it first. The concept tended to be linked to geopolitical and economic factors, the speed in communication being discussed as one of the key factors in the development of globalism. With that speed, of course, comes compression of space and time, and all the implications of that.

KH: All tied to technology. Perhaps, then, it's not an accident that the rise of the PC coincided with the rise of the term globalism.

VND: It's about information and access to information. It's worth noting that multinationals understood this much earlier, and began to use the word globalization as an indicator of successful business practices. A corporation may look for cheap labor in one place, but do their packaging somewhere else if it's more cost efficient. Ultimately, the goal is to reduce cost and maximize profit. It's also a question of the markets: where the markets and new economies emerge, corporations follow. The role of Asia in this rise of globalization is an interesting phenomenon to consider.

KH: In many ways, Asia led the way both as a market and as a producer for the multinational companies. Maybe, then, it's not surprising that we in the West are most familiar with the contemporary art practices in Japan, as opposed to, say, Africa or Latin America or even other regions of Asia.

VND: Japan was much closer to industrialized Western notions and nations, so there's greater familiarity and proximity. Our recent interest in Chinese art, for all kinds of complicated reasons, is wrapped up in the aura

of dissident art, which fits nicely into our notions of the avant-garde. But knowledge of contemporary practices in Southeast Asia or India is pretty nonexistent in this part of the world.

I would like to go back to the issue of globalization as interconnectivity. People are now beginning to examine where the intersection lies between connectivity and specificity, and how we can understand the nuances of that intersection.

KH: This is a really vital question, not only for those of us in the arts but for those in business as well. For example, it's fine to be connected at some practical level, but what happens, in these intersections, to differing codes of ethics, codes of values, ways of doing business? Are those cultural specificities being erased or are they becoming even more specific? What are the politicians, economists, sociologists, business people saying about that when they're at the Asia Society's podium?

VND: We recently had a presentation by one of our board members, Jack Wadsworth, honorary chairman of Morgan-Stanley, Asia, who is also, incidentally, a big champion of contemporary art. He just retired and returned to the United States after more than a decade in Asia. He did a comparison of India, China, and Japan, focusing on values and modes of leadership. For example, one could argue that centralization of leadership in China has made it possible for them to stay the course and create economic growth. Whereas, in India, the cacophony and diversity of voices, which makes a flourishing democracy possible, makes it more difficult sometimes for the country to move forward at the same pace as China.

Amartya Sen, an economist, philosopher, and Nobel laureate, has written a wonderful paper called "Culture and Development," which I found very enlightening.[2] He talks about culturally specific values and how they get interpreted in differing economic circumstances. For example, when Japan was rising, we often talked with admiration about the values that the Japanese brought to their business practice—consensus-building, loyalty, etc.—and considered them to be crucial to their success. But even as that economy fell, the same set of values remained in place. You have to realize that this set of values is constant, but at certain times they are useful and at other times they might be detrimental to the successful movement forward. It's not enough to understand what the values are; you need to understand their contextual placement, how they play out at a given time and in a given circumstance. They are not essentialist, they are contextual, and that has relevance for all of us in terms of how we deal with the values we bring to our own work and to our understanding of contemporary art.

KH: I'm fascinated by differences. I'm very interested in connections, but I'm more fascinated, in a way, by what I'm not. As I said to my son the other day: Life is a journey toward trying to realize who you are. Often that journey is shaped by who you're not, not as a way of separating yourself but as a way, actually, of seeing yourself. For example, I often wondered, when I spent some time in Japan beginning in the mid-1980s, why the pace of transacting business seemed so different there. Long conversations over tea resulted in contracts made without the benefit of lawyers. There were rituals to relationships that had to be followed; they forced me to take the time, which I might otherwise have been foolish enough to think I didn't need, to learn more about the people and the culture I was just beginning to understand. Considering the increasingly accelerated timeframe of communication, transactions, etc., it made me wonder how, in fact, this remarkable cultural difference—a slower, more deliberate and choreographed way of proceeding—was reconciled with the information age, the age of the instantaneous.

VND: There's an interesting story related to this. I was talking to someone who worked at UNICEF when the Internet revolution first began, and what they discovered was that people were really offended by this new code of communication, by how people wrote letters on the Internet. In the United States, we tend to treat e-mail as a very conversational, informal method—a quick two-line response and then it's done and gone. In many countries, they expected e-mail to follow the same rules as formal letter-writing, so if you didn't include some of the niceties that you would use to construct a formal letter, it was an insult to them. The use of e-mail was breaking down conversations rather than forging them.

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2 Amartya Sen, "Culture and Development," paper delivered at the World Bank, Tokyo, December 13, 2000.

I had a similar experience of differing values when we were working on one of our early contemporary shows. I was in Indonesia meeting with an artist. My colleagues in the U.S. were sending the artist requests for information by fax since he did not have Internet access, but they were not receiving a response. When I looked at the letter—a letter that would have felt completely comfortable to me in New York—I was appalled because it followed none of the ways that you would appropriately and respectfully request something in Indonesia. This notion of difference in the specificity of communication, no matter how much you are a part of the information age, comes up often and you must deal with it. The danger lies in the illusion that, because we live in the age of channel surfing and fast-paced Internet connections, we completely understand one another. In fact, we don't.

KH: That is ultimately the hideous danger of globalism. Another is a horrific homogenizing, even though we know that the McDonald's hamburger in India may taste different ...

VND: Because it's not made of beef!

KH: Exactly. Even the multinationals have recognized that they can't always export exactly the same thing from Manhattan to Mumbai. But it's still a burger, so even the appetites of a culture are influenced by this homogenizing, this flattening of individual desire and taste (in the broadest sense of the word). But, additionally, there's a prevailing sense that we don't need to take the time to understand the underlying values, the culturally specific values. I believe that it is the responsibility of arts organizations to highlight those differences and values, and by doing that, paradoxically, to connect us all. In other words, we're going to get connected not because we're all the same but because we recognize and respect our differences. The connections are simply the distribution systems, like telephone networks. They're not the content.

VND: We will be truly connected only when we have a fuller understanding of our differences. To actually accept somebody, fully recognizing their differences, is the hardest thing to do, right? Yet, as you were talking, I realized, given my own personal trajectory, I am forever trying to find connections. I don't know if it's because I'm a middle child, or because I left India at the age of sixteen and was thrown into a situation where I didn't know a soul in America. But I found myself asking, How can I connect with people so I won't feel so lonely?

KH: It seems to me that no matter how you deal with the existential dilemma, it's still a dilemma of autobiography and history, which binds the individual to his or her social standing. I wonder if any social, ethical, or political agenda is ultimately not rooted in the personal. I'm sitting here smiling at the two of us because we both have been pegged at times as pioneers, whether or not we accept that rubric. Isn't it partially related to the fact that we are women who came of age in the 1960s and became museum directors at a time when the "gender wall" began to fall, and we realized we could actually help knock it down with our questioning?

VND: I suspect our institutional missions owe something to our own sense of social activism. We both have a certain level of intellectual curiosity and cultural openness and, therefore, a willingness to put ourselves on the line. Some people might call it foolhardiness. I tend to get to the top of a cliff before I realize there is a precipice, a potential for falling down. Maybe it's useful that we don't initially ask where this journey is going to take us, but rather just believe in the process.

KH: We ask a lot of questions along the way, but we don't need to find the answers immediately. I don't expect to reach a point in life when Truth—with a capital T—will be revealed. Life is about stumbling on multiple truths. I don't mean to harp too much on the issue of gender, but I am interested in how gender does play out in the global arena. I am absolutely aware of the difficulties my Japanese female colleagues have to this day being major players in their country. I'm also aware of the issues of leadership that can be colored by gender. I think the way some women lead parallels the network model: it is inclusionary and, perhaps, less linear and more hyperlinked and open.

VND: One could argue that women intrinsically understand the flexibility of one's sense of identity. Some people have said it's because women traditionally have had to play multiple roles—daughter, mother, wife—all at the same time. As a result, there is a flexibility of identity, which we now define as the postcolonial, the third space, the shifting of identity, multiple identities. Women seem to adapt more easily to it. I would like to think

that this is a strength moving forward into the twenty-first century, which does and will belong to people who can live in multiple places simultaneously and recognize that their identity changes from place to place.

Yet, as leaders in cultural institutions, is it our task, when taking on a new project like this, to try to make connections by finding similarities, which is different from being homogenous, or to look for the differences in how people deal with these issues and accept these differences, learn from these differences?

KH: I'm realizing that the older I get, though I remain galvanized by the single art object, what really keeps me involved daily are the ideas contained in that object. I am looking, I guess, for people whose approach may be very, very different from my own, but through dialogue with them, even if it is frictive, I become bigger and the ideas—as well as the artwork—become richer. Certainly, when starting our initiative, we needed to have a core of familiar people on the committee, just to create a foundation, some security. But most of the people around the table were new faces. And, somewhat miraculously, we found facets of each other that linked us together.

I want to go back for a moment to this notion of the avant-garde. I don't hear that word used much in visual arts discourse these days. The question for me is, does it have any historical currency in, say, China, which you mentioned earlier? From the Western perspective, we may have embraced their artists as engendering a revolutionary reflection of the avant-garde. I know this is very hard to answer in a broad sense, but what, if any, historical currency does the notion of the avant-garde have in Asia?

VND: Again, it depends on the culture, so you have to parse it out. In the Chinese tradition, it was something that people were really attracted to, especially in the 1980s and early 1990s. I would venture to say that one of the reasons for this is because China, within its own cultural practice, has a tradition of resistance to a mainstream. Therefore, this was an idea that they could relate to and make their own. It is simply not that foreign to the Chinese, whereas it was not a word that had the same level of currency in Southeast Asia. In India, it's very complicated because of the nationalist movement. There, the notion of subverting a mainstream or of subverting the national ethos in some way—in this case, it was a colonial ethos—was a part of the practice. Therefore, people could also relate to the notion of the Western avant-garde as something they would resist, subvert. At the same time, India is a very peculiar place. Even just recently, I was in India and I heard again and again that people are very proud of how various food companies—McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Dominos Pizza—have to drastically change their usual practice to suit the indigenous taste in India. And people talk about how outsiders who come to India end up being Indianized to a much greater extent than they are able to assert some sort of influence on India. That reveals a very different way of dealing with the dominant, the outside: by incorporating it into something indigenous. It departs from the resistance or the dialectic model. I've sometimes referred to the Indian approach as an amoebic model—little pieces that open up, get separated, and then get incorporated into a larger organism, which is a very incremental process.

KH: What I find interesting is that the Indian embrace of the avant-garde, if I understand it correctly, resulted paradoxically in the Gandhian delight in tradition and the imperative of tradition.

VND: Exactly, since that was a predominant way to subvert the colonial enterprise.

KH: So, in fact, even though we think of the avant-garde and the idea of resistance as being about the creation of something new, in India, the avant-garde was a return to something indigenous, precolonial.

VND: That was the most revolutionary thing you could do. But, then, that quickly became the conservative model, and artists and intellectuals moved away from it. It's partly the injection of the nationalist discourse into the avant-garde that makes it much more complex.

KH: And rigid?

VND: Sometimes rigid and dynamic at the same time.

KH: Having visited India with you and seen a lot of modern Indian painting, I want to ask you—and you may think I'm off base with this question—why has so little of it been embraced by the West? Why has so much of it made our curators scratch their heads? Whereas contemporary Indian art is having something of a breakthrough, though I realize that's a loaded term. Why those distinctions?

VND: It's not just in India. The situation is the same in many parts of Asia. Art from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in many of these countries is very problematic for the West because, often, it looks like a paler reflection of something happening here. Even though it has its own trajectory and its own history of the early twentieth century, most of the time Western curators are not able to see that. The work is seen as derivative and it's very hard to break out of that label. What has shifted in the art practices of the current generation is the level of confidence with which they operate. They don't care what label you're going to assign them. They are of this world and often are part of the urbanized centers. They've gone to art schools and have been trained in Western media. In that sense, theirs is a middle-class to upper-middle-class urban art practice. Many of them travel on their own and are increasingly more connected to the outside world. As a result, their attitude is "I'm going to do what I want to do and I don't care what the rest of the world thinks."

Even in the West, you don't hear the term avant-garde anymore, and there is a greater diversity of practice with less emphasis on "isms." In my opinion, this is a very welcome change. As a result, artists are able to free themselves from prevailing trends and pursue more individual paths of expression.

KH: And to shape new markets. The diminishing of an absolutely dominant canon that was shaping the market is also a welcome sign.

When I co-curated Against Nature: Japanese Art in the 1980s,[3] many people criticized it for having succumbed to an international language of the visual arts, which I thought was peculiarly naive. Many of the critics had no idea of the cultural specificity…

VND: Of that visual language.

KH: Or not even so much of the language but of the syntax. Even in our efforts to be global, to be multidisciplinary, there is, as you put it the other day, a particular prism through which our curators are looking. It is a prism that is framed by a certain international language, a formal language, of art, installation, video, most of which is conceptually driven. What do you make of that?

VND: The truth of the matter is that we probably cannot escape our prisms. But it is crucial to acknowledge that such prisms exist and to be aware of what they reflect. For example, we were criticized when we organized Traditions/Tensions[4] for not having a collective curatorship with one curator from each country who would be the spokesperson for that country. I felt very strongly that it was important to have a single curatorial vision. You can knock it down, but at least that vision is articulated clearly.

KH: Did Apinan, being Thai, have any problem being the Asian specialist?

VND: No, because we said he was an Asian specialist. We had a group of advisors, but we were very clear that the decision about what would be in the show was not up to the team. Also, Apinan traveled extensively and multiple times throughout the region to establish deeper relationships with artists and with the advisors.

KH: One of the interesting things about the Walker's global project is seeing how the curators initially described, and then had to redescribe, what this initiative was about to the artists with whom they were trying to work.

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3 Against Nature: Japanese Art in the 1980s was co-curated in 1990 by Kathy Halbreich, Thomas Sokolowski, Shinji Kohmoto, and Fumio Nanjo for the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, and List Visual Arts Center, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

4 Traditions/Tensions was curated by Apinan Poshyananda for the Asia Society, New York, in 1996 and traveled to Vancouver, Canada; Perth, Australia; and Taipei, Taiwan.

Many of them came back saying, “I started to say we were doing a global show and immediately felt like I had plunged a knife into my heart.” I do think institutional intentions—again, these abstractions—need to be made particular, human, intimate when the curators take them out into the field.

VND: Absolutely. We initially thought that Traditions/Tensions would encompass all of Asia, but we quickly realized that it didn’t need to be all-inclusive. So we decided to use five countries (India, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Korea) as emblematic of the kinds of changes that were taking place in the region. We wanted to make it very clear that it was not the show, but a show, the first part of a long-term commitment to the study and presentation of contemporary Asian art. This one show couldn’t do everything that needed to be done for this major endeavor.

KH: One of the terms that Apinan uses is cultural syncretism, which he considers to be a fundamental concept that is not new to Asian societies. I began to wonder if, in fact, this offers a new paradigm for Western institutions, and if these ideas of connectivity, synchronization, partnership are something that we can benefit from.

VND: Increasingly, the kinds of partnerships we are talking about question the authorial, singular power of the individual. I’ve begun to realize that, ultimately, you need to build relationships and partnerships if you want to do long-term work. You can’t do it by yourself. One thing the Walker’s initiative has done for me is to raise questions, in my own mind, about how we think about “Asian-ness” or “Western-ness.” It’s not just about Asian-ness over there, or Asian-American-ness over here; increasingly it’s an issue of how Asian-ness has seeped into Western-ness, and vice versa. People asked me a decade ago why I wasn’t doing a show of Western artists who are deeply affected by Asian art, such as Brice Marden or Francesco Clemente. I was very adamant at the time that if I was going to do contemporary-art projects, I needed first to give voice to those who had not yet been seen or heard.

Today, however, that argument doesn’t hold. I am interested now in mixing it up completely, so that you begin to think about Asian-ness or Western-ness not in a racial sense, or in a geographical sense, but in a conceptual sense. It is a kind of cultural syncretism that can break the binary definitions of East/West and allow for a greater understanding of the elasticity that artists bring to their work, whether here or in Asia.

KH: Isn’t that, again, the remarkable outcome of a benign definition of globalism, where it truly is not about import/export but about exchange and infusion? Not that we lose our identity, but the ways in which we can define and represent ourselves become richer. I don’t mean to be romantic about globalism. I realize, painfully, that some people in the world can see me only as a symbol, as a member of a dominant culture and of the superpower. Most of us are all too aware of the pernicious underbelly of it. But what we have tried to do in this initiative is to find some of the grace notes, to discover ways of moving forward with an appropriate mix of skepticism and optimism.