The 8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art: Interview with curator Aaron Seeto

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IAN WERE

Ian Were: Aaron, I have a couple of questions that might start the conversation. In what position do you think the Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) series of exhibitions stand right now in the world of contemporary art?

Aaron Seeto: Let's look at the legacy of the APT as a way to answer the question… I have only just joined the [Queensland Art] Gallery, so I have the benefit of viewing this from a slightly outside perspective – the APT has substantially driven the discourse around contemporary art from the region and I believe it is one of the most important periodic exhibitions which Australia produces… There is still room for these types of large-scale exhibitions, and the APT maintains a prime role. The APT's longevity and also the Queensland Art Gallery's collection developed over the life of the APT project illustrates the gallery's deep commitment to the art of the region. It also provides an informed base, from which the curators working on successive editions of the APT are able to speak. It is clear that this is a deep interest for the gallery, and through its activity – the APT assists in the development of a critical discussion, where the art of the region and our cultural connection to Asia and the Pacific opens up all kinds of dialogues.

IW: It's interesting that you mention the bigness of the show, something I'd like to return to later. In the period since the first groundbreaking APT in 1993, has its relevance shifted, given the emergence of several other biennials and triennials in Asia and the Middle East?

AS: I don't know if the relevance has shifted, because we are not talking about a static set of conversations. Artist and curatorial practices, which emerge from the local scenes in Asia and the Pacific are also shifting, as is the critical environment that is responding to new pressures including issues of global circulation, the market etc. Looking back through the archive, and seeing the energy and curiosity that surrounded the first edition in 1993 these intangible factors are still there. However, looking back to 1993, I doubt that you could develop any large-scale exhibition in the same way it was done then. The world has changed; the types of global conversations that are occurring now are very different to the 1990s. You can see the APT in the context of some other important projects like Fukuoka Asian Art Trienniale, for instance, and these models are very different to other biennial models that you might see elsewhere. The relevance of APT, and also Fukuoka, is that you can see the development of deep knowledge bases. What I think audiences appreciate, and this was the case for me, is the texture of the APT, which avoids a smooth globalism, because it is invested in the voice of the artist.

IW: Do you think there's a more sophisticated cultural discourse now between Australia and the Asian and Pacific regions?

AS: Definitely, yes, but it depends on who you're talking to and where you're talking from. If we were to look at the development of the APT as a barometer of the levels of acceptances and the social shifts that have happened within Australian culture, definitely; the landscape now is very different to 1993 but how you answer the question really depends on where you're talking from.

IW: In 1993 it seemed that a number of visual arts organisations and curators around Australia were quite disinterested in contemporary art of the region, and in many ways it was APT1 and, maybe even more the 1996 event, that began to stir them and they gradually became interested in the region's art.

AS: There has been a great broadening of the field of contemporary art, and also an awareness of the contemporary art of the region. I think it is true that the APT has played an important part alongside artists and other curators, critics, art historians and organisations working in this field.

IW: Each successive APT has to some degree attempted the application of conventional museological criteria. The first APT in 1993 ordered the show in geographical terms with the artists classified via regions (Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific); APT2 in 1996 followed in similar fashion — but with a line-up of performance and installation artists. APT4 in 2002 sought to historicise the art by emphasising certain major artists (including Yayoi Kusama, Lee-U-fan and Nam June Paik). APT5 in 2006 emphasised the art of China with artists such as Ai Weiwei and Yang Zhenzhong, as well as screen-based work. APT6 in 2009 included art from the Middle East (Iran and Turkey), and APT7 paid special attention to the art of Papua New Guinea and the Pacific. Looking back, some critics — including Rex Butler in a 2012 *Broadsheet* article — have suggested that the APT series of exhibitions in general, can be seen as survey shows with few other curatorial principles at play. Is this reasonable?

AS: Of course there were other curatorial principles at play; these are necessary to structure all kinds of exhibitions. The way that you've articulated it might also illustrate the types of shifts that have happened within curatorial practice itself — how, for example, institutions try to order the conversations or distill the types of research they've been doing within a very large geography. It's not as simple as saying that

Simane Wénéthem, *Yumi Danis (We Dance)* as part of Emyo Tinyo Dance and Music Festival, Ambrym, Vanuatu, 2014.
Photograph: Ruth McDougall.
Courtesy: Queensland Art Gallery.

one methodology has more or less curatorial ordering than another. However, it is important to reflect on how our conversations have developed.

IW: Which brings us to the current event. Is there a particular curatorial focus that APT8 has?

AS: There is an interest in performance that looks at the relationship of the body to social and political discourses, things that shift from territory to territory. It is an idea of performance that unpacks the intersection of local cultures and global networks; that seeks to draw out nuance, respond to history, champion the vernacular and create critical spaces for art. This APT asks, what makes these bodies reflective of their histories and environments? What can be learnt, and how can individuality be reinserted? The preoccupation has really centred on artists and how they engage with these broader social, political and cultural transformations and, as we've looked at this we've uncovered a tendency to focus on the body.

IW: Does that performative aspect include video and moving images?

AS: Yes, of course. It's such an important part of contemporary practice.

IW: And live performance?

AS: Yes, there's a mixture of performance approaches. There are durational performances, work that's been created for screen, there are works that will evolve over the whole period of the APT, and there are projects which have been incubated in the Pacific through workshops and forums. Performance seems front-of-mind at the moment, but we aren't necessarily talking about the canonical representatives of institutional performance art. What sets this APT apart, is that we are talking about the body and a whole range of social spaces, we're talking about processes that are both within the conventional museological modes, as well as perhaps, ritual, the customary and the vernacular.

This is one of the important legacies of the APT — when we look at artists' practices, we cannot assume that these traditions are interchangeable or that they mean the same thing from one place to another. Over the years that I have experienced the APT, it often asks you to question your own prejudices around what you think a museum should be doing or what can be presented within a gallery – that's what's exciting.

IW: I agree. One of the interesting things for me was that the APT had the potential to change people's ideas about what might be seen as contemporary art. The APT kept reminding me, for example, that in many countries in our region, particularly the Pacific, there's no such word as craft in the way we use it, it's all simply art.

AS: We can expand on that in the context of performance traditions in, for instance, South East Asia. We're not talking about the types of stylised or mannered performances that we might find in Western traditions, and I'm oversimplifying this, of course, but there is, if you look at the history of performance art in certain places in China or in South East Asia, the relationship between ideas of democracy or human rights or other political contexts are so closely aligned. One thing that is very interesting about this project is that we can't assume that everything is as how we've been told to imagine particular kinds of practices. I am particularly looking forward to the projects that Ruth McDougall has been developing with a number of Pacific artists, or the work that we have been doing with vernacular traditions in India.

IW: Are we likely to see work that's from the collection, particularly in terms of video and moving image?

AS: Not really. Not in terms of performance documentation of those earlier APT projects, and Lee Wen's *Journey of a Yellow Man No. 13* (1999) from APT3 immediately comes to mind. However, we are re looking at certain areas of practice, which we've explored in the past, which follow one of the other thematic threads in this APT – that of the vernacular. In APT3, we included the work of Sonabai, a woman from Bihar, who created clay-filled domestic environments of figurines and latticed jali [*Untitled*, 1999]. There was a lot of debate at the time about the inclusion of this kind of work within a contemporary art exhibition. We are revisiting some of these vernacular traditions from India in this APT, with a major project called *Kalpa Vriksha*. It has been quite interesting to revisit the work that we've done in the past — so it's circulatory, a nice revisiting.

IW: Several other commentators have noticed that recent APTs have not only become much larger but have tended to focus on the spectacular, just for the sake of it or perhaps following the lead of many international biennials and triennials, except for those with smaller budgets like say Istanbul Biennial and some others in Asia, probably, rather than the more thoughtful, maybe smaller, even gentler forms of contemporary art. Compare, for example, the first two in 1993 and '96 with the last two in 2009 and 2012. Your thoughts?

AS: It's definitely a large-scale exhibition. But if people only come to view the spectacle then they have perhaps misunderstood the depths that the APT is able to achieve. It's not an unconsidered selection of work. We've thought very carefully about how the selection talks to the history, politics, societies and geography of Asia and the Pacific. It's hard to respond to those types of criticisms because they're criticisms that are levelled across more than twenty years of exhibition making. On the

other hand, these kinds of criticisms can be helpful in illustrating the changes in attitude to exhibition making over the years.

IW: Is the spectacular better? Is the spectacular necessarily a bad thing?

AS: It always depends on the project itself. I've had this conversation with other curators: simply because you do a big project doesn't necessarily mean that the work can't be about intimate conversations or that the spectacular is devoid of meaning. Some people also assume that you can't do popular and meaningful at the same time. Well, yes, you can. The ability to talk across a range of different audiences is something which large-scale exhibitions like this can achieve and which often smaller-scale projects can't; that's important.

IW: I preface the next question by noting that geographical 'Asia' is a cultural artefact of European conceptions of the world, as well as the fact that countries like Armenia, Georgia and Cypress, while nominally in 'Western Asia', are socio-politically European countries. Over the years the APTs have explored contemporary art in, what could be called, our region, the Asia and Pacific region. In the Asian region the APT has been gradually exploring further afield, to Australia's far west, to countries such as Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Armenia and, this year, Georgia and Mongolia. Some commentators see this as a kind of curatorial colonisation, a cherry picking of artists from the countries of the Middle East, or those sometimes called West Asia simply perhaps for political or curatorial reasons. Your thoughts on these developments?

AS: I think you're right in terms of the fluidity of definitions around Asia and its relationship to geopolitics – Asia, is of course, a geopolitical construction. Artists and regions are included in successive editions based on a range of factors – from the internal logic of the project, to the interest that arises from the artists being presented. This year we see work from Mongolia — it is a fascinating group of artists and bodies of work, which make connection to both thangka painting and other forms of Buddhist iconography, socialist realism but tied up with the current economic and societal transformations occurring in Mongolia. There is also work from the Kyrgyz Republic by Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev. This presents a shift in attitude to land and place in what is now an independent country, which arises from a confrontation of Soviet history and contemporary free markets influenced by the reorganisation of economic influence emerging from China's burgeoning. APT has a commitment to West Asia, that's just a fact now; we are building a collection around West Asia.

IW: A number of commentators have noted there was substantial dialogue particularly in the first two or three APTs with quite intensive seminars, people came from all over it seemed, including Asia, and there were extended weekends of discussion, and then suddenly that changed. There were seminars but they were different and much smaller. Will this change with APT8?

AS: Yes, we're hosting a conference on, well, firstly, we've got the whole opening weekend of activities including public talks and performances. And then there's the APT Conference the following week, which will bring curators and artists together. This conference will look to artists and their practice to draw out some of the conversations, which we have been having around this APT. This will be followed by AAANZ [Art Association of Australia and New Zealand], who are holding their conference here.

IW: Has the APT changed the way Australian and international art viewers, curators, artists and commentators understand contemporary art?

AS: Definitely, yes. The APT has held a very important leadership position, not just in Australia, but also internationally. Its longevity over twenty years, has seen it participate in some of the key discussions. It's because of the APT that the Gallery's collection is one of the finest; one of the most important collections of contemporary Asian and Pacific art.

Lee Wen, ***Journey of a yellow man no. 13: Fragmented bodies/shifting ground*** (still) 1999 / Videotape: 10:30 minutes, colour, stereo / Purchased 2000. Queensland Art Gallery Foundation / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art.

Opposite page: Uuriintuya Dagvasambuu, ***Path to wealth***, 2013, 149 x 99cm, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Purchased 2015 with funds from Ashby Utting through the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery.