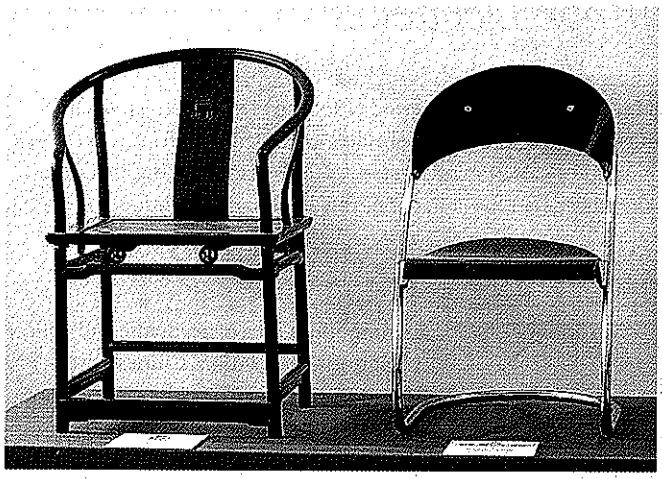


A 17th century horseshoe armchair displayed alongside the ST 14 chair by Hans Luckhardt in the exhibition

PD: One of the attractions of mounting an exhibition is to introduce the pieces to people who may not know the material well and who, therefore, will react to the objects instinctively, with honesty and with their own references. Being able to make Chinese visitors respond to their own art and create a link with their own set of aesthetics, is a source of great satisfaction. What particularly pleases me is the obvious natural connectivity visitors have with the exhibits and their ability to place furniture into a broader cultural and historical context. The enthusiastic reaction seems to indicate that furniture can no longer be considered a minor art form.

The personal support and presence of the world-renowned furniture expert Wang Shixiang; the extremely high number of visitors and the substantial media endorsement all illustrate that this has been recognized as an important event for the field and Chinese art in China.

O: Your collection is being shown together with modernist furniture from the Vitra Design Museum. How well does modern design sit with classical form?

PD: Beyond its established technical qualities, it is the very concept of classical Chinese furniture which makes it contemporary to new generations of designers – it is modern! Its modernity can be expressed through artistic beliefs and expressions like 'less is more' and 'form follows function', which have been developed in early 20th century Europe, notably in the Secessionist School of the Wierner Werkstäte and the Bauhaus movement.

Being able to exhibit fine examples from both Ming and modern European masters side by side strongly illustrates the lasting influence Chinese classical furniture has had and continues to have on European craft. The visitor can experience at first-hand, for the first time in China, that which art critics have recognized for many decades: art is indeed a balance between continuum, innovation and convergence.

Wang Shixiang and Grace Wu in the Yongshouggong

I See the Future in Fast-Forward: Asian Contemporary Art Week in New York

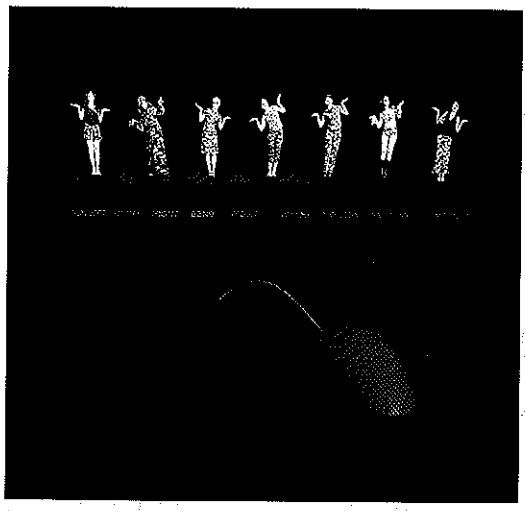
Asian Contemporary Art Week (ACAW) in New York first began in 2002. During ACAW, a city-wide network of galleries, museums and other alternative venues offers art exhibitions and related programmes focusing on art from today's Asia. A variety of attractions packs the week, inviting people to explore the city's artistic neighbourhoods: Uptown, Midtown, Downtown and Chelsea, as well as the outer boroughs of Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens. ACAW is organized by the Asian Contemporary Art Consortium (ACAC), an alliance of curators, gallerists and collectors who first came together because they believed in the future significance of contemporary Asian art. Looking back from today's vantage point, the consortium accurately foresaw the future – that is the current high visibility and explosive energy of the field. Held this year for the fourth time, the ACAW has again made an important forecast: video is the medium that will command our attention. From 22 to 27 May, the 2006 ACAW, entitled **'Fast Futures: Asian Video Art'**, featured video works by 39 artists, from regions ranging from Iran to Japan, which were screened at 28 venues. The question is, then: why video? Moreover, why Asian video art now?

The Korean artist Nam June Paik is popularly credited with the conception of video art in 1965, when he first acquired a Portapak, Sony's portable video camera. As this new piece of technology became a household commodity, Paik famously characterized video as a 'democratic' medium of art-making and distribution. Accessibility and familiarity with video was consequently reflected in the increasing number of artists using it as their tool. Additionally, Paik's passing in January this year triggered serious retrospective efforts, along with appreciation and historicization of new media art. Today, the significance of video art is undeniable.

There is another set of factors, technical and conceptual, that is causing video art to blossom. Because of its effect and malleability, video seems to surpass pre-existing media – such as painting, sculpture and even photography – in its ability to capture the rapid changes of the world. With the application of video technology, artists can observe changes constantly, record them quickly and analyse, edit or reconfigure them through performance art. Passage of time, vision and sound are easily integrated; this ease of use is also an enormous encouragement for both young artists and artists

who were previously working in other more conventional media.

For Asian artists, the technical advantage is not the only reason for using video, its relative lack of historical burden is also liberating. Whether created in the past or in the present, an understanding of Asian art needs to take into consideration Eurocentric preconceptions and the pedagogy of art and art history. Interestingly, many emerging Asian artists now leapfrog traditional methodology by skipping conventional art school training all together to adopt video – possibly the only medium that can compete with the pace of change in Asia, whether economic, social or environmental. Freed from artistic conventions, Asian video artists are fast forging ahead in uncharted territories.



(Fig. 1) *Untitled*
By Shilpa Gupta (b. 1976), 2004-05
Interactive video installation
At ACAW, New York
Image courtesy of the artist

The 2006 ACAW was, in this sense, most appropriately entitled. It was launched on 22 May with a programme of panel discussions at the Asia Society. Moderated by Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Society Museum, the panel included Barbara London from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, Johan Pijnappel, a specialist in new media art based in India, and internationally exhibited Indian artist Vivan Sundaram. As curator, art historian and artist, respectively, each brought varying observations about video as a new means of expression, and its particular significance in Asia.

Barbara London, who has been instrumental in forming new media programmes and collections at MoMA, highlighted the improving infrastructure in China, a place she recently visited for research. Two of the country's most prestigious art schools, the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and the China National Academy of Art in Hangzhou, have recently established new media departments. The easy access to image generating tools and computers equipped with open-source and shareware programs, not to mention pirated software, has accelerated the emergence of video artists there. Curators and collectors from all over the world flock to China to see this phenomenon, but London admitted the tendency of these 'parachuted' individuals was to inevitably remain somewhat at a distance from culturally specific contexts, which could be reached through greater engagement with local people and places than occasional visits alone.

Nonetheless, London has observed that young Asian artists are acquiring self-confidence. They have technical resources and connections to the outside world via the Internet; and if visitors do not come to them, there are an increasing number of foreign residency programmes and international biennales through which to make their presence known. Maybe in their eyes, the wall of cultural contexts is more porous than it may have appeared before.

Even during this age of globalization, society and history are built on layers of meaning; Pijnappel agreed with London that official and unofficial censorship, biased social hierarchies and resulting injustices still exist. Many Asian artists take the initiative to tackle this reality. In India, for example, radical video artists emerged in the face of political, social and religious atrocities: particularly the destruction of Babri Mosque by Hindu activists and resulting counter-riots by Muslims in Bombay in 1992, nuclear bomb testing in 1998 and the massacre in Gujarat in 2002. Instead of passively relying on dominant news media as the source of information, these politically conscious artists created video art that did not necessarily refer to the incidents with actual footage: rather, they produced works that demanded the viewer's active interpretation and contemplation by visually translating culturally specific historical incidents into universally identifiable human struggles. Pijnappel also characterized Indian video art as having a strong presence of women artists, such as Nalini Malani and Shilpa Gupta (Fig. 1). In order to defy the typified female role and to protest against violation of their human rights, they present alternative voices and the stories of their lives through video, taking full advantage of its ability to scrutinize not only the public sphere but also the more intimate and private realm of existence.

As a practising artist, Vivan Sundaram elaborated on this particular sensibility toward storytelling in video work. He believes that this link to the private realm by means of video might extract the most creative potential in contemporary Indian artists. While he described much of contemporary Chinese art as leaning toward large spectacles, Sundaram hopes more Indian artists will re-examine the tradition of narrative painting and its application to works based on moving images. This focus on narrative is still considered to be a minority approach and comes with a risk of definitional confusion, since comparison with film-making becomes inevitable. For instance, as Barbara London commented, Chinese artist Yang Fudong's intricate series of videos *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest* is both aesthetically and thematically comparable to films by Antonioni (Fig. 2). However, in terms of visual installation, video

(Fig. 2) *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest, Part II*
By Yang Fudong (b. 1971), 2004
35mm black-and-white film transferred on DVD
Duration 46 minutes 15 seconds
Image courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

(Fig. 3) *Flowering Plants of the Four Seasons: Spring and Autumn*
By Kosemura Mami (b. 1975), 2004
Animation, colour and sound
Duration 9 minutes (endless repeat)
At the Shibazaki residence, Kawaguchi, Saitama prefecture, Japan
Image courtesy of Yuka Sasahara Gallery

work can be far more flexible, and can extend beyond a conventional 'black box' theatre.

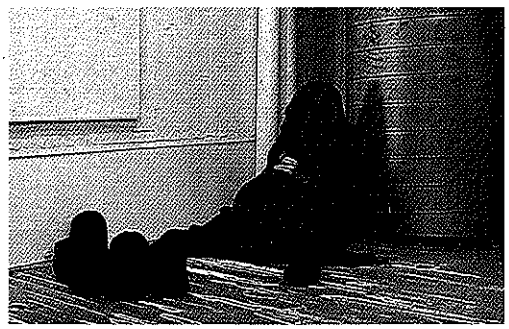
Interestingly, one particular instance of cultural stereotyping concerning Indian video art, that Sundaram brought to everyone's attention, is the spectators' expectation of a connection with Bollywood. There are, in fact, some artists consciously making reference to this popular form of entertainment by way of a pastiche of music and gaudy storylines. However, unlike the clear-cut endings in Bollywood movies, the conclusions in video art are often twisted to form unresolved conundrums. While the Bollywood movie industry continues to thrive internationally, there is a lack of substantial institutional support, in terms of teaching and financing, of new media art in India. As witnessed by Pijnappel, the interest in art and technology appears to be spreading faster at the grassroots level there, unlike in China where the government appointed artist Zhang Peili, once marked as a possible threat to authority, as the head of the new media department in the Hangzhou academy. However, Pijnappel anticipates that India will catch up within a matter of a decade and concluded the panel discussion positively, noting that there is already enormous energy, interest and enthusiasm in video art both within and out of Asia, and that we can look forward to an exciting future.

Video art cannot simply be claimed as originating from or belonging to the canonical Euro-American context as it came into being during the formation of a global media society. It is exactly because of the pervasiveness of moving images that we may have become desensitized to culturally specific contexts and structure in video art. In short, it may take time for us today to see it as 'art' not because it is new, foreign or unfamiliar but because it is too familiar.

The discussion also coincided with the opening of the Asia Society's own exhibition, **'Projected Realities: Video Art from East Asia'**. It presented works by six artists from China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan – places that particularly excel in producing large quantities of hardware and high-quality software, and are generating a strong creative force in the field of new-media art. The exhibition focused on a variety of formal and conceptual approaches: from straightforward monitor-based playback of animation, video installation and performance-based video, to more cinematic work. For example, Kosemura Mami's *Flowering Plants of the Four Seasons: Spring and Autumn* used projection screens simulating Japanese sliding doors, *fusuma* (Fig. 3). The work revealed a connective thread between the art of today and that of the past; Kosemura, who initially worked as a painter, found inspiration in the traditional subject-matter of the four seasons. Her moving picture was created by making a collage of digital photographs recording the blossoming and decay of actual plants and flowers. The images were then edited together into a composition emulating *fusuma-e*. The recurring screen projections activated a vision of reincarnation through nature's eternal circle of birth and death.

Another enchanting work screened at the Japan Society during the ACAW was *Enclose* by Philippine artist Bea Camacho (Fig. 4). Camacho videotaped her eleven-hour-long performance in which she crocheted her entire body, starting from her toes, in red yarn, and once completely enclosed the enormous cocoon was gradually unravelled from the inside. The performance was intended specifically for video recording; the entire duration of the work was played on a monitor set on the gallery floor, showing the painfully slow progress of the act that the artist performed in a corner of her quiet studio. Time and movement, two of the most important elements of video art, came under scrutiny in this work as viewers were made to question the meaning of beginning and end.

Encountering contemporary art from the Philippines at the Japan Society was, in truth, an unusual yet refreshing experience. The ACAC's networking efforts for the ACAW resulted in the participation of some unique venues, including the Diapason Gallery. This is the only place in the city thoroughly devoted to experimental sound art, and it attracted a whole roomful of people during the sound and video performances by Flow Sound Collective, which lasted well into the night. Managing director of the ACAW and independent curator, Leeza Ahmady, gave a lecture on contemporary Afghan art at Chuk Palu that operates both as a commercial rug gallery and as the Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan (CCAA). In a city that boasts of its multiculturalism, Chuk Palu is the sole provider of a connecting point for contemporary Afghan artists. In her talk, Ahmady emphasized that Afghan artists are largely under-represented even at a venue such as the Asia Society. Her voice was loud and clear, and her effort throughout this year's ACAW surely brought signs of change.



(Fig. 4) *Enclose*
By Bea Camacho (b. 1983), 2004
Video
Duration 11 hours
Image courtesy of the artist
At ACAW, New York

Miwako Tezuka is assistant curator at the Asia Society Museum, New York.

'Projected Realities: Video Art from East Asia' was dedicated to the memory of Nam June Paik. His wife Shigeko Kubota, herself an internationally renowned artist, was in the audience during the 22 May panel discussion. Asia Society is grateful for her continued encouragement of art and experimentalism.