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A PRESENTATION BY ALEXANDRA MUNROE, IN CONJUNCTION WITH CHINA IN ASIA/ASIA IN CHINA

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Transcribed and edited by Daisley Kramer and Jane DeBevoise

This presentation by Alexandra Munroe was delivered in conjunction with a panel CHINA IN ASIA/ASIA IN CHINA: Imagining Asia in Contemporary Chinese Art, organized by Columbia University and Asia Art Archive in America. From the perspective of contemporary visual art practice, this panel interrogate the role of China in Asia and Asia in China from multiple perspectives. Acknowledging that the concept of Asia itself is a construct which has been put to multiple purposes in the 20th century, this panel looked at how projects in this Asian space have begun to emerge in the imaginary of contemporary practice in China, particularly in the last five years. This panel also explored how China figures in the imaginary of artists today, and in particular artists working in India, Japan, Korea and Vietnam.

Jane DeBevoise (JD): The next speaker is Alexandra Munroe. Colleague, friend and advisor to Asia Art Archive, Alexandra is presently the Samsung Senior Curator of Asian Art at the Guggenheim. For this panel Alexandra has been asked to speak to our topic from the perspective of Japan, as a scholar of Japanese art and having a long experience there.

Alexandra Munroe (AM): Thank you Jane and John for organizing this panel. It is an interesting topic of discourse and discovery. It is something that, as Doryun said, has haunted all of us who are thinking about these issues for a long time, but so far we have been hovering at the edges of the topic and haven't quite had the opportunity to draw its contours. And thank you, Jane, for mentioning the show that I organized at the Japan Society Gallery, Transmitting the Forms of Divinity: Early Buddhist Art from Korea and Japan that presented early work from Korea and Japan, because I think it is important to understand that the development in the field that we are feeling our ways towards, what we call an inter-Asia approach, is not only happening in the areas of modern and contemporary art and practice, but also increasingly in the area of pre-modern art studies and research. That exhibition, which was presented in 2003, came about through a collaboration between the museum directors and curatorial staffs of the Nara National Museum and the Gyeongju National Museum in Korea. They both said this kind of exhibition could never have happened in either country, that it took the umbrella of a 'neutral' country - America's not often called neutral - [laughter] to be the convener of research and conversation that led to this exhibition that had a very radical thesis. This thesis was that Buddhism and continental culture did not come to Japan directly from the motherland of China but rather came through the Korean peninsula, a fact that most Japanese for about a millennium haven't loved to admit. By demonstrating the stylistic transmission of Korean Buddhist art and culture of the 6th through 9th centuries to Japan, the show went further than any previous one towards reattributing the sources of Japanese culture in the context of East Asian civilization.

I think we do want to acknowledge that there are some radicalities in some of these suppositions that we are making. I also want to thank Doryun for mentioning [Yoshimi] Takeuchi and 'Asia as Method' which is a lecture and an essay that has deeply influenced my work over the last 20 years. I cite it frequently in my writings not only for what you mentioned as a kind of pro-China aspiration and thesis but really for an early attempt - post-Okakura, post-pan-Asianism, post-Nishida's Kyoto school - to come up with a political aesthetic for what being modern and Asian is, without a relationship to the West, which is also what we are talking about here: How can we construct an Asia not in a usual kind of binary of East and West, not as Japan and the West, or China and the West, but how about another set of rules, another set of dynamics? So thank you for your very inspirational talk.

The focus of my talk - and I will race - I did this very polemically - I haven't slept in 4 days - I've been in several countries - I am not going to get into any depth. I am just going to raise some questions. I will be speaking a little bit on Japan in the imaginary of China. And within this imaginary, I want to raise a few points. For one, what we've all been talking about has a very charged historical context which has lingering forces on contemporary Chinese culture. I will talk about this, and I will give a couple of examples on how Chinese artists today consciously appropriate Japanese sources to advance their own creative language. I am not saying that is something that is actually going on. I am just going to give you two discreet examples to inspire thought. And if we have time, I want to touch a little bit on contemporary ink painting because that

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ARTISTS, CRITICS, CURATORS, AND OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

Aisha Khalid, Aki Onda, Aki Sasamoto, Alexander Keefe, Alexandra Chang, Alexandra Munroe, Alf Chang, Ali Van, Amy Lien, Amy WOOD, Annysa Ng, Anthony Tino, Anthony Yung, Arin Rungjang, art history, art institutions, artist interviews, Ashley Billingsley, Ashok Sukumaran, Bahar Behbahani, Bahar Behbahani, Bani Abadi, Bani Abidi, Barbara London, Beatrix Pang, Belinda Q. He, Benjamin Moskowitz, Beth Citron, Betsy Damon, Bing Lee, Birgit DONKER, Boon Hui Tan, Boris Groys, Brinda Kumar, Cai Guoqiang, CAMP, Cao Fei, Casey Tang, Chang Chao Tang, Chang

is something that I know many of us are working on and thinking about and it is growing into a complete intellectual and market industry, primarily in China. I think some of us find this a somewhat problematic zone where Chinese and Western critics together seem to be involved in a project of constructing a discourse of what I call - what everyone calls - cultural nationalism that is in my view quite anachronistic in its nation-based rhetoric. It refutes rather than integrates a shared cultural imaginary that is certainly broadly shared across East Asia, and if you consider calligraphic expression or abstraction, you can find your way right into the Middle East, as well.



Madeln (Xu Zhen, b. 1977), *Spread*, 2009. Mixed media on canvas. Courtesy of the artist

Speaking of the Middle East, I thought I would start a little facetiously by showing this wonderful work by the group Madeln, spearheaded by the Chinese conceptual artist Xu Zhen, a Shanghai artist born in 1971. Here his work is presented as the product of a fictional collective of Middle Eastern artists. He is making these works in China, but presenting them in an exhibition as if they were made by a collective of Middle Eastern artists. He is making a complete spoof and satire, drawing on imagery, drawing on iconography in this billboard-sized tapestry that very consciously touches on all of the stereotypical geopolitical imaginaries that we as members of the global art community project onto the Middle East, thereby making fun of the whole project of global contemporary art which is so focused and so obsessed - aren't we all? - on trying to locate geopolitical identity among the artists who are emerging from a particular region. I find this work marvelously subversive, and maybe a little bit of something to think about as we enter our discussion in a couple of moments. Because really what we are here to discuss today is: what is the relationship between national and cultural identity and more broadly, in the context of today, what is the relationship between inter-national and inter-cultural identity? And I think Xu Zhen gives us some things to think about.

So first, and everybody here knows this, is the profoundly negative history of Japanese imperialism. If we are talking about Japan in the Chinese imaginary, we cannot consider it without acknowledging the searingly brutal images that the Chinese people grew up with, and the historical context of the very troubled Japanese and Chinese political relationship in the 20th century.

Here of course you have the May 4th Movement in 1919 that many of us have already discussed. You have to remember that the May 4th Movement came out of a protest against Japan. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Japanese negotiators moved to secure the areas that had been under German colonial spheres of influence, including the Shandong Peninsula where the Japanese and Chinese believe that Confucius was born, an area of Northeastern China that is deeply embedded in the earliest self-identity of China as a nation. The idea that Japan's active aggression and its own Chinese government in an act of complete weakness would cede this territory to Japan aroused among the Chinese students and Chinese intellectuals and early revolutionaries, if you will, a huge protest. They were outraged. So of course, we know that Japan becomes in the political and cultural imaginary an object of OPPOSITION. And of course, many great things came out of the May 4th Movement. It marked an intellectual turning point in China, but it is just as important to recognize that out of this language of modernity which we will talk about later emerged the beginnings of a transformational revolution and "new" China. Nonetheless this very transformational revolution had its origin directly in a political event that was charged against Japan.

Next we have, of course, the Japanese in China. This is a well-known map of imperial Japan around 1940 showing Chinese territories under Japanese rule. Not a very pretty picture. So between 1931 and 1945 these two countries were waged in the largest war in Asia in the 20th century, making up more than 50 percent of the casualties in the Pacific war. The Japanese imperialist policy aimed to dominate China politically and militarily and secure its vast raw material reserves and other economic resources like food and labor – we all know what the legacy of that was. And of course the key event in this and the key searing visual event in the political, cultural and intellectual history of Japan in China is the Nanking Massacre. I want to thank Lyn Hsieh for finding this piece in a Japanese newspaper praising a Japanese soldier of the imperial army for killing over 100 people in a single day in Nanking.

So this is not a great history, and as we know from the enormous and violent protest that broke out in 2004 when Japan won the coveted Asia soccer game in a very charged final game, this antipathy, this hatred, this mistrust, this 'Japan as opposition' imaginary is still very strong, very vital, certainly in contemporary Chinese political discourse and among the general public.

At the same time, things are complicated – because as many of the other speakers have mentioned, Japan is also the site where modernism in China is formed. In the formation of Chinese modernism are a key and profound series of events and series of relationships, beginning with Sun Yat Sen, who went to Japan and in 1905 basically founded and wrote his thesis, his manifesto of democracy which would become the founding principle of the Guomindang (KMT) party and catalyze the overthrow of the Manchu-led [Qing dynasty], and later the warlord-led interim Republican government from 1912 to the early 1920s. Intellectually, in the formation of very modern ideas – whether law, democracy, or nationalism, whether it is the idea of people's livelihoods – all of these very modern ideas that were political ideas as well as cultural and intellectual ideas, were circulating at the level of discourse and debate in Japan from the late 1800s and well into the early 20th century. Japan had already become a place of exile for many Chinese who could no longer think progressively under the brutal rule of the late Qing and the early warlord period.

Many of us have also mentioned a number of Chinese artists who went to study in Japan, including of course Fu Baoshi who was in Japan from 1933 to 1940. It is not only important that these artists were there because China was at war – there were all kinds of reasons that they could have been there. But it is important to understand that in the case of Fu Baoshi, he went to study at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. He translated many books from Japanese to carry on his own research. His encounter with the Japanese discourses on tradition, on cultural nationalism, on ink painting, on how to be modern without being Western, how to engage your cultural past, how to be critical in a revolutionary way not in a reactionary and retrograde way. All of this was extremely influential to Fu Baoshi who then of course goes back to China where he becomes the head of the Chinese painting school at Jiangsu Province and also later taught at what is now Nanjing University, the Central University. So [this sojourn in Japan] is not only important in his own practice as a painter, but also to who he came back to be and who he influenced as a teacher. And these influences, intellectual and artistic, become very embedded in that period of Chinese modernism both within the ink painting groups as well as the early modern painters who were developing at that time.



Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957), *Shadow: Pray for Protection*, 1985 – 1986. Gunpowder, ink, candle wax and oil on canvas, mounted on wood , 155 x 300 cm. Collection of the artist, courtesy of the artist

Fast forward – to Cai Guo-Qiang and contemporary appropriations. With all this history embedded in the past, what are contemporary Chinese artists doing? I am going to show you work by Cai Guo-Qiang and Cao Fei. Among the post-reform artists in the Cultural Revolution, [the imaginary of] Japan changed from this horrific occupier and war-time enemy into actually a kind of kin. It shifted from a position of enemy to kin. How were China and Japan conceived of as kin in the mind, in the imaginary, of Cultural Revolutionary thinkers? They both had a common enemy, which was Western American imperialism. Things start to shift in very interesting ways in the 1960s. Among the Japanese avant-garde, including Mona-ha and including others you will see in Doryun's show, Mao's little red book was their favorite book. There was a whole discourse going on in Japan in the 1960s about solidarity with Vietnam. There was a huge outcry against American military bases in Japan. What is interesting in this painting by Cai Guo-Qiang which he paints while he is still in Shanghai is that he is actually painting a picture of Hiroshima. He is actually painting a picture full of sympathy for the atomic bomb [victims]. Not Japan as perpetrator of atrocity, but

Japan as victim of atrocity. So there is an interesting shift that is going on in the minds of some artists of his generation.

Japan was also one of the destinations for Chinese artists in the post-reform era. Artists went to Paris. Artists came to New York. Artists went to Sydney. Several artists, Cai Guo-Qiang, most famous among them, went to Japan. He acknowledges, as many of us in this room know, how much he learned about his own critical and expressive language from Japan, from the example of Japanese contemporary artists, primarily from Mono-ha and post-Mono-ha artists, whom he knew. These were the artists who were showing at the time. This was the discourse that was going on in Japan at the time. So Cai very much engaged again in the discourse of how we can be modern but not Western, how to be critical and phenomenological by drawing on our own modern philosophical sources rather than always simply subscribing to monolithic Western narratives.

There was a lot going on here that Cai learned from. He maintained a studio in Japan from 1986 to 1998 when he moved to New York but he goes back several times and continues to have a very strong base of followers there. He was shown at the Hiroshima prize a couple of years ago. Here is a very charged image: For a Chinese artist to make an art work using the image of a Shinto shrine – the wartime emblem of Japanese imperialism – is actually quite amazing.

I am not coming to any conclusion. I am just reminding us that there are biographical exchanges among some post-reform contemporary Chinese artists that have deeply informed and shaped their aesthetic through their encounter with Japanese contemporary art. And in Cai's case, an encounter with traditional performance culture, also; he cites Tea a lot.



Cao Fei, *Hello Kitty (COSplayers Series)*, 2004 Photograph, digital c-print. 30 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Another example is Cao Fei. Her first important works that gained international attention were a riff on the Japanese subculture art of the Otaku phenomenon – Japanese anime and manga characters, the whole idea of superhero, the whole idea of how we live in these virtual societies and how we can escape the drabness of life in these vast cities of Asia. What is also interesting in Cao Fei's case, is the ease with which she uses and appropriates "Cos players" and other symbols of this contemporary Japanese movement. It is of course interesting that she is working on Guangdong, [a region of China that] historically has a very long, rich history with Japan. In fact, when I first went to Guangzhou, it looked like Osaka to me. There are deep cultural ties between Japan and Guangzhou that an artist from Beijing may perhaps not feel. This is just a series of polemics that I throw out. And now I would like to end with my ink painting polemic.



Takahiro Iwasaki (b. 1975), *Out of Disorder*, 2008. Installation, Lyon Biennale 2009. Courtesy of the artist

This is a work by a young artist Takahiro Iwasaki who I saw at the Lyon Biennale [2009] curated by Hou Hanru. It is a pile of colored towels on the floor and if you look very very closely, you will see that the artist has very delicately constructed a series of tiny little pagodas. It is basically a Chinese landscape painting. The complexity of what exactly is meant by modern and contemporary Chinese art and the controversy surrounding who is responsible for its research, publication, and collection are topics of debate that raise intellectual, aesthetic, and institutional questions that are far from being resolved. And basic to this project is the question of how to deal with ink. Is ink just another medium at the disposal of the contemporary artist whether he's Western or whether he's Indian or whether he's Iranian or whether he's Chinese? Or is it a cultural system whose codes can only be manipulated and deciphered by Chinese nationals, the initiates, or initiated specialists? Is all ink painting guo hua, literally nation-painting, and grounded consciously or not in a project of China's essential cultural identity? And if it is, what are the implications for ever translating it into a truly international language, like oil painting or video or installation art? Is Chinese [ink] painting for now and ever more defined by the ethnic (or national) origin of its maker rather than by the aesthetic sources which the modern artist freely chooses?

Among a certain group of colleagues, we've talked about this a lot. So as we debate the future of ink, I think we should recognize that artists, curators, and academics basically fall into two courts. There are those who defend the Chinese literati tradition as a cultural system, encoded in the medium itself - ink, brush, paper - and those who seek to draw from that system a conceptual wellspring - what I call the "ink attitudes" more than an ink practice - shuimo de taidu. So I propose that this "ink attitudes" can liberate the principles of ink from a strictly Chinese purpose to include conceptualism, inter-media - and even appropriation by Western artists, which was the subject of my 2009 exhibition at the Guggenheim, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*. Most importantly, the idea of "ink attitudes" encompasses innovation by East Asian artists who are deeply embedded long before contemporary Chinese artists were in this debate with how to modernize, synthesize Chinese ink into a language larger than the cultural-specific codes of its own language. My purpose is to engage in a discussion about the boundaries that have long separated modern and contemporary ink painting by Chinese artists from both the Asian and the modern art departments in both Chinese and Western art museums and universities.

I hope I have been provocative.

Alexandra Munroe, PhD, is the Samsung Senior Curator of Asian Art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Since joining the Guggenheim in 2006, where she heads the Asian Art Program for the museum and its global affiliates, she has organized *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, which won Best Thematic Exhibition in New York City by the International Art Critics Association (AICA) for 2009; and co-organized *Cai Guo-Qiang: I Want to Believe*, which was among the best attended exhibitions in the museum's history. Its catalogue won the 2008 Wittenborn Prize for outstanding scholarship, design, and production. She is internationally recognized as a pioneer in the field of modern Asian art for her landmark exhibitions and publications including *Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective*; *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky*; *The Art of Mu Xin*; and *YES YOKO ONO*, which won first prize for Best Museum Show Originating in New York City in 2000 from the International Association of Art Critics (AICA). AICA also awarded Munroe, as project director, first prize for Best Thematic Show in New York City for *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, curated by Takashi Murakami, in 2005. She served as Vice President of Arts and Culture at the Japan Society, New York, and Director of Japan Society Gallery from 1998-2005. She holds a BA from Sophia University, Tokyo, an MA from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and a PhD in history from New York University, where her research was modern East Asian intellectual history. She serves as a trustee on the boards of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University; the United States-Japan Foundation; the Korea Society; and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

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