

# AESTHETIC POLITICS AND BUILT FORM LOOSELY SPEAKING

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Established in 1993 by the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG), the *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* has been undeniably instrumental in bringing critical recognition to contemporary aesthetic practices from Asia and the Pacific, including Australia and New Zealand. Its fifth installment in 2006, *APT5*, was launched in conjunction with the opening of the new Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA). Located just one hundred and fifty metres away from what has been the singular venue for the *APT* since its inception, GoMA completes the QAG's expansion to a 'two sites, one vision' institution, better able to house its collection, significantly expanded in works from the Asia-Pacific region with the in-house curation of *APT*. As Australia's largest gallery of modern and contemporary art and an "important new cultural landmark for Queensland", the new building heralds not only Brisbane's latest effort through new museum architecture to secure its place on the global cultural map of world cities, but also its now-doubly enhanced status as a notable art city. Married to a blockbuster exhibition that makes the city a site of pilgrimage for devoted art aficionados every three years (or four; since *APT5* pended on GoMA's completion), it is also, of course, deeply entrusted to increase the market value of the city year-round by playing a key role in the region's urban development and tourism (the QAG is governed by a Board of Trustees appointed by the Queensland Government). *APT5* doubled the scale of its previous editions presenting more than three hundred works by thirty-seven artists, filmmakers and performers as well as two multi-artist projects, vying for attention with the new architectural space it both spawned and now operates from as a second site. This much is a given.

Inevitable perturbations arise however, when there is an unquestioned politics of built form that surround a key moment in a cultural institution's development. With the GoMA not being a spectacular piece of 'sculptural architecture' compared to say, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the approach has been to extol how the new gallery, aside from being a stunning building, is significantly an "exemplary venue for displaying contemporary art" with spacious, white-washed rectangular rooms, high ceilings and movable walls—basically an impressively purpose-built white cube.<sup>1</sup> 'Gobsmacked' (the Premier's descriptor for the effect of the new building) or not, by the new museum's deliberate and celebrated return to the white cube—that most paradigmatic of modernist display formats—raises concerns about the implications for a perennial exhibition which has strived over the years to challenge, by presenting diverse cultural expressions and histories over-determined and undermined by, precisely the ideological positions of universality and (Western) modernity embodied by this display conceit.

Designed by Brisbane-trained architects Lindsay and Kerry Clare, GoMA is on many levels an archetypal modern museum with glass and black panelling and a slightly-curved overhanging roof. It is a riverside pavilion situated at Kurilpa Point on the South Bank with its main glass-walled façade turned towards the Brisbane River, in contrast to the other inward-looking buildings, such as the QAG, the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, the Queensland Museum and the recently renovated State Library. These buildings make up the Queensland Cultural Centre designed by Robin Gibson and of which GoMA is now a part. While the view of the edificial glass showcase is fetching from across the river, the main entrance is in fact to its left, facing the QAG's refurbished curved-glass entrance across Stanley Place. From this angle, GoMA truly looks like what it is, a black box/white cube; side by side, they appear to pay tribute to a happy co-existence. Separated by a wall of glass windows and doors, the exterior mirrors its interior operation as cinema and modern art gallery, respectively, and it is through this park entrance that most people find their way inside the monolithic structure.

Inside the main foyer, Eko Nugroho's commissioned black and white mural depicts a super-sized space creature taking over the two-storey expanse of right wall amidst other smaller extra-terrestrial gadgets. The title and cartoon bubble of big space spud, *It's all about the destiny! Isn't it?* (2006) may be overstating the comic book adventure in the officious sanctity of the modern art gallery. Past the catchment area, a sharp right turn leads to a well-naturally-lit eighteen-metre atrium with immaculate white walls and a picture-perfect view of North Bank way at the other end. The Pavilion Walk, as this lofty mid-section is called, is flanked by the traditional museal enfilades (the building is based on a cruciform plan). Most visitors will proceed in a slow rhythm through this open passage first, past works pristinely hung on the wall such as John Pule's canvases drawn from Niuean oral histories in the South Pacific, Tsuyoshi Ozawa's *Vegetable Weapon* photographs, and his collaborative Nasubi Gallery project—twenty-eight collection-sized wooden boxes, each presenting a mini-exhibition by an artist invited by Ozawa (most of whom were already involved in *APT5*)—which interestingly extends the exhibition space as well as curatorial matters on a number of alternative scales. Through the opening on the far left, Jitish Kallat's *Public Notice* (2003) declares an exploration of predestination entirely different from Nugroho's; while Anish Kapoor's room of sublime pigment sculptures might be missed altogether, being tucked behind Sutee Kunavichayanont's *Stereotyped Thailand* (2005–06), a participatory classroom installation to produce iconic rubbings—which, facing Kallat's installation of the first Indian Prime Minister's famous speech (on the occasion of India's independence from Britain in 1947) burnt onto five distorted reflective surfaces, heightens the political urgency of both projects.

With the exception of perhaps Nugroho's commissioned mural entrance and arguably some of the 'communitarian' works, site- and time- specific projects, all-over installations and examples of diverse contemporary artistic practices that resist being white-cube bound are not a main feature of *APT5*, despite its presentation (sans theme) of art that according to the catalogue, "engages with the aesthetic, social and political aspects of everyday experience". But then, nor is GoMA's open structure particularly conducive to these kinds of spatial interventions. Other installations occupy the right wing in GoMA. Dinh Q. Lê's *Lotusland* (1999) and Zhou Biao's *Utopian Theatre* (2006), an eleven-channel mediated spectacle

of political events served up by an elaborate claymation diorama, as part of the Long March Project. Displayed on round raised white plinths, they evinced a more sculptural dimension and certainly in the case of the latter, a feeling that they could have been exhibited anywhere (or at least will soon be elsewhere). Founded in 1999, the Long March Project, which next heads for the *Auckland Triennial* is an evolving international platform and organisation which uses Mao's famous Long March (1934–36) as a discursive framework to engage with China's cultural past and to present through art activities and workshops in remote Chinese villages, international exhibition projects and artist residencies. Its successful foray into the biennale circuit, for all its critical ironies, has been a lot less arduous than the historic trek from which it takes inspiration. Long March is represented by the work of eight Chinese artists in GoMA as one of *APT5*'s two multi-artist projects. (The other, at the QAG, is the *Pacific Textiles Project*, which hung on walls and laid over knee-level plinths seems to demonstrate an over-reliance on conventional museum aesthetics, or a 'misunderstood display' of material culture, as a legitimising frame for the cultural and social significance of the histories written into these mats—for example, the nearby Maori-inspired abstract paintings by Gordon Walters).<sup>2</sup>

Shown in conjunction with a new three-channel video installation, *The Farmers and the Helicopters* (2006), which captures shifting memories of the first major helicopter war (The Vietnam War), Lê's *Lotusland* examines the effects of herbicides (the worst known as Agent Orange was used by the USA between 1961 and 1971) that include cancer and long-term congenital defects, particularly a high incidence of conjoined twins. It memorialises these "special spirits," long treated as taboo subjects, through a larger-than-human-scale gathering of fibre-glass children, each doll-like but with two heads and deformed bodies, who sit in lotus flowers carefully laid out on a low, stark-white disc-shaped plinth. *Lotusland* is in fact a continuation of an earlier public project, *Damaged Gene* (1998), where Lê sold miniature versions of these figures—designed as plush and plastic toys, as well as pacifiers and a clothing line custom-made for conjoined twins—in open markets and a department store in Ho Chi Minh City, in order to bring attention to and break the silence around birth defects caused by Agent Orange. Video documentation of this project along with its initially appealing commodity objects are available for scrutiny (but no longer for sale) in the glass display cases to the left of GoMA's entrance lobby, ironically, just steps away from the well-(art-souvenir)-stocked requisite museum bookstore conveniently located on the way out.

To be fair, *APT5* only occupies the first level of the new gallery. GoMA has five levels, but only two are used as gallery space. (The third level is allocated to exhibitions of indigenous Australian art and the permanent collection.) Between the two gallery levels is the mezzanine entrance to the Australian Cinémathèque. For *APT5*, the adjacent media gallery celebrates the urban action cinema of Jackie Chan, Hong Kong action film star, choreographer, director and writer. Billed as the only such facility in an Australian art museum, GoMA's cinematic black box—its impressive protracted program throughout the duration of the *Triennial* showcasing the work of seven *APT5* filmmakers (and video artists) from China, Hong Kong, India, Samoa, New Zealand, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Warramungu/Luritja people in Australia, as well as Chinese historical films and Japanese anime—attends to

the long-overdue recognition of not only film as a contemporary art form, its diversity, breadth and emancipatory effects, but also the increasing interplay between screen culture and contemporary artistic practice. At the same time, it cannot take the place of time-based installations, noticeably scarce in *APT5*, where the moving image—however slow, still, or projected—plays an integral role in the structural determination of meaning and that are justifiably integrated within the layout of the main exhibition space.

For time out, GoMA has two eateries, a restaurant on Level One and a boardwalk café on the park level. Both are located on the riverside, allowing for a leisurely coffee break to mull over site and politics. The River Café and the entire South Bank, for that matter, is on traditional land, which used to be known to the Coorpooroo people as Kurilpa, or "place of the water rats". This area was the prime hunting ground for southern Aboriginal tribes for thousands of years before European settlement in Australia. For a building that supposedly "engages the river," the low level of activity on the waterfront is surprising. This is all the more intriguing considering how Nicolas Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics' seems to come up more than once in the introductory essays and catalogue entries. An ongoing communal creative project that activates the river history of the public site might let the city's newest bricks-and-mortar monument to culture make a strong statement about its relationship to local indigenous peoples in a way more lasting and meaningful than concentrated one-off extravaganza performances on Australia Day weekend. This is of course about instilling a sense of public belonging and accessibility (in that department, the flourishing education program, Kids' *APT*, wins hands down compared to the string of talks and symposia targeted at 'serious' visitors). More significantly however, it would also broach the issue of addressing the way the QAG's collection, and by extension the new museum, belongs in this place and vice versa. With artworks physically contained inside either QAG or GoMA (most showing little interest in re-inscribing the structural frame they are put in), *APT5* performed little in the way of resisting the apparently now-globally-replicated canon with off-site projects in the city, shifting hybrid locations, or online works. In other words, there were no signs of experimental cultural trespassing beyond the institutional walls (though I'm on the fence with *APT5*'s companion publication, *Artreader*, published by Artworkers and the Institute of Modern Art). From where I sit, the curves of the Brisbane River offer a great contrast to GoMA's hard edges.

At the QAG, Ai Wei Wei's *Boomerang* (2006), a dazzling seven-tier chandelier made out of 270,000 crystals hung in the Watermall, simply boggles the mind. Commissioned by *APT5*, this "spectacular monument to consumption and display" speaks not just to the desired brokering "bling" of "China's increasingly affluent middle class."<sup>3</sup> It also comes back to the question concerning the self-reflective project of *APT* and its critical relationship to built form, one which functions towards branding Australia's image and its relationship to the Asia-Pacific, as well as circumscribing the diverse modes of experiences exhibited—some "generative, initiatory, venturesome" (to use Ross Gibson's terms)—that may entail a necessary de-centring of its structural and ideological frame.<sup>4</sup> In an essay titled, 'The Global White Cube', Elena Filipovic observes how the traditional white cube continues to not only proliferate as "an ubiquitous

architectural surround for artworks in museums", but also, surprisingly, in mega-exhibitions which aim to be "larger than the mere presentation of artworks", with many founded as a "paradigmatic alternative to the museum".<sup>5</sup> The *APT*, however, is a rarity in that it has intimate connections to its hosting institution. Hence, the QAG's collection and exhibition policies strategically-targeted to focus on contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific serve explicit diplomatic and bureaucratic, in addition to aesthetic goals, which indubitably impacts on curatorial decisions concerning the significance of works of art, as well as the predominance of certain preferred permanent mediums fit for display in the traditional white cube. More than seventy per cent of works featured in *APT5* are either already in the collection or about to be acquired. Concomitantly then, it is appropriate to ask how *APT*'s worlding of Asia-Pacific might thrive given the discrepancies and contradictions between an already built form and how, writes Filipovic, "the particularities of artistic practices (are) connected to and imbricated in the actual structures that allow for their experimentation."<sup>6</sup> One strategy may be to ensure that the exhibition apparently expanding alongside its favoured format is paralleled with a stream of articulations that include not only discursive statements of purpose combined with debates and responses to the "aesthetic-spatial result" within catalogue essays, wall texts, and ideally other passages, but also experimental display approaches and more dynamic and relational activities to challenge global modernity's recasting of the resilient traditional white cube as the only ground against which everything else should matter.<sup>7</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wayne Goss, Preface, *Fifth Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (catalogue), Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2006: 10

<sup>2</sup> Doug Hall, 'It's All About the Destiny! Isn't It?', *Fifth Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*: 15

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Tiffin, 'Refined Anarchy', *Fifth Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*: 56

<sup>4</sup> Ross Gibson, 'Aesthetic Politics', *Fifth Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*: 21

<sup>5</sup> Elena Filipovic, 'The Global White Cube', *The Manifesta Decade*, Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic eds, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005: 65–66

<sup>6</sup> Ibid: 78

<sup>7</sup> Ibid: 69