

In and out of Oxford: reflections on *Art and Trousers*

Art and Trousers is an improbable and intriguing title for a book! In a sense the work contains a book within a book—a play within a play. And, as with Shakespeare’s plays within plays, the insertion disrupts the temporal flow and adds to the pleasure of the performance. *The Chronicle of Trousers* appears in the Foreword and is serialized as the introductions to the three sections into which the book is divided. The reader is given the option of reading that narrative as a whole. The history of trousers is inserted into the text just as Bottom is inserted into *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Unlikely though it may seem, the reflections on trousers give insights into parallel processes in the world of art: movements that effected change in Europe can be seen as part of a global discourse in which fashion, or simply clothes, played a sometimes significant and often an irreverent role. And in a way it is the role of that ‘mercurial garment’¹ in the narrative that allows me to feel that I can say something about a book which, as the subtitle suggests, lies somewhat outside my area of expertise.

IMAGES AND TEXT

David Elliott’s twenty years as director of the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford (MoMA) (1976–96), were foundational to his subsequent career. There followed successive directorships of the Moderna Museet Stockholm (1996–2001), and the newly established Mori Art Museum in Tokyo (2001–06). He helped to launch the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art in 2007, before leaving institutional positions behind to devote his energies to curating on a global stage. He was the artistic director of the 17th Biennale of Sydney (2010), and curator of the inaugural Kyiv International Biennale of Contemporary Art (2012).

The book begins with an extended introductory narrative focusing on his time in Oxford. There then follow a series of previously published and revised essays on his engagement with Asian art. His curatorial practice has been based on building relationships with people over time. And as one might anticipate from a book that reflects a lifetime of making exhibitions, the images are as important as the text. The illustrations are wonderfully rich, eclectic, and at times irreverent—a parallel way of engaging with the book. The images encourage the reader to reflect on the relative autonomy of the history of form, yet its continuing entanglement with social processes. Fashions

¹ David Elliott, *Art and Trousers Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Asian Art* Hong Kong: Art Asia/Pacific Foundation, 2021

recur and sequences are disrupted. Extraordinary synergies exist across space and time – art provides a medium of discourse between similar process in very different contemporaneous contexts. In *Who's wearing the trousers?*, looking at striking images of Mao's suit and Marlene Dietrich's 1933 trousers, we are asked to reflect on the challenging relationship between artists – and the works they make – and power.²

There is a strong biographical component to the book but by no means a linear one, and some artists and some works recur with new significance as they take their place in different essays. The book provides insights into why David Elliot was such a great museum director and subsequently such an innovative curator of major biennales. The exhibitions that he created are central to the trajectory of his life and are arguably his most significant contribution to art theory and art history. Images and exhibitions create spaces for interpretation and reflection – perhaps more than written texts – and often leave the argument open. But in Elliott's case the contribution he made through his exhibitionary program becomes surprisingly clear. From the very beginning he was challenging linear and Eurocentric understandings of the meaning of 'contemporary' and challenging its association with modernity and the avant-garde. In doing so he made it possible to see world art in a different way. As Vishakha Desai notes in her Prologue, David Elliott challenged twentieth century conventional concepts of authenticity. The perspective on art history one gains from the exhibitions he curated and the range of works chosen is very much in accord with the emerging art historical challenge to the use of the term "contemporary."³

THE PLACE OF OXFORD

Oxford has long been a city of museums, from the foundational Ashmolean to the University Museum of Natural History where Thomas Huxley debated evolution with Bishop Wilberforce, and its adjoining museum of anthropology, the Pitt Rivers Museum. But a Museum of Modern Art arrived late and without a collection.⁴ Elliott saw the MoMA's location in Pembroke Street in the centre of Oxford as a place to make a difference, allowing him to use the immense resources of the University and City to the MoMA's advantage.

His essay on 'K.G. Subramanyan–An Indian in Oxford'⁵ reveals the process of his museum practice. He begins with an idea or a topic, and follows it up with research, developing relationships with artists, curators and academics, then seeks the resources for creative engagement that might perhaps lead to an exhibition. While pursuing a broad agenda the process also allows for serendipity. In his essay on Subramanyan Elliott's agenda is clear in challenging the *either/or* of tradition and modernity, and the view that the West led the periphery into modernity; "A culture that believes in the reincarnation of the soul finds it difficult to take seriously the western obsession with chimera of originality."⁶

² Ibid., pp. 167–169

³ Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009

⁴ The Museum of Modern Art Oxford was founded in 1965 and today continues under the more contemporary label Modern Art Oxford

⁵ Elliott, pp. 170-173

⁶ Ibid., a typically bold generalization!

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**From Ottoman Empire
to Turkish Republic**
Modernity at a Time of Change



**A Short History
of the Trouser**



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Elliott first met K.G. Subramanyan in Delhi in 1981 researching his 1982 exhibition *Indian Myth and Reality: Aspects of Modern Indian Art*. He selected for the exhibition a set of terracotta reliefs that the artist made in response to the atrocities committed in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Subramanyan was subsequently awarded a Christensen Fellowship at St. Catherine's College (1987–88) which allowed him to be an artist in residence at MoMA. There he worked on a series of gouaches on perspex where the "languages and traditions of modern Indian art are conflated with experiences of living in Oxford – the heartland of the Old Empire."⁷ I was personally struck by one image, *Inayat Khan looks at Oxford No.3* (1987), where an Indian gentleman drinking a cup of tea is observing naked dancing figures cavorting and floating in a North Oxford garden. The gabled Victorian house and the expansive urban gardens reminded me of my childhood visits to the mysterious donnish environment of North Oxford where some of my friends, the offspring of Oxford dons, resided.

THE HEARTLAND OF THE OLD EMPIRE

In 1986 I had returned to Oxford from thirteen years in Australia researching the art of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land and teaching at the Australian National University. I was appointed as a curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum and a University Lecturer in Ethnology. Curiously, despite my local origins, with no Oxford degree and arriving from Australia I had assumed the identity of a welcomed outsider. Somewhere in Oxford's cloistered and distributed hierarchy the message came that something needed to be done to celebrate Australia's bicentenary and that perhaps a newly arrived expatriate curator could take that role. Under the rubric of *Australia in Oxford*, a title suggested by Sir Zelman Cowen,⁸ the Provost of Oriel College, I was able to co-curate in less than a year a distributed exhibition in four locations – the Ashmolean, the Pitt Rivers Museum, the University Museum and Museum of the History of Science.⁹ Another story, but it made me aware of the extraordinary nature of Oxford's collections and the mysteriously supportive environment that could be directed to new ventures. And very soon after my return to Oxford I became a regular attendee at the openings of exhibitions at MoMA and got to know him.

As Director of MoMA he saw in the eclectic set of museums and in the schools of art, and architecture, and the departments of art history, anthropology and the humanities more broadly, the opportunities to develop new ideas. In 1976, in the context of the Western art world, "'modern' and 'contemporary' meant more or less the same thing and one could still use the term 'avant-garde' without any tinge of irony."¹⁰ He set himself an agenda: the progressive encompassing of the arts othered and decentred by the Western placement of them off-centre from contemporary art practice. This not only meant journeying outside the Western axis but also required looking at Western art history in a different way.¹¹

⁷ Elliott, p. 171

⁸ Sir Zelman Cowen (1919–2011) was a renowned constitutional lawyer and academic who served as the nineteenth Governor General of Australia (1977–82), before becoming the Provost of Oriel College

⁹ See Howard Morphy and Elizabeth Edwards, *Australia in Oxford*, Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum, 1988

¹⁰ Elliott, p. 11

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12

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Elliott's radical stance is at times heavily critical of the trajectory of Western society—the “vast industrial laundromat of contemporary art”¹²—the way in which art had become the prestige commodity of the elite, somehow separating form from the meaning and significance of the works, and from the artist's intension. From that radical stance he strongly defended his application of what some might problematize as conservative perspectives—arguing that the very idea of art implies qualitative judgements and that comparative analysis is fundamental. He carried forward the question, “Was any of it really good?”¹³ While going beyond the mainstream he was nonetheless looking “for equally good things in other places.”¹⁴ But good needed to be defined within a broader global world, and this involved understanding local and regional trajectories, historical positions, different histories of practice, and different engagements with the past.

In looking outside, and moving into the domain that subsequently would be framed as alterity, he created exhibitions that would challenge conventional expectations of what the visitor might find in a museum dedicated to modern art; for example his 1978 exhibitions *The Inner Eye: Work Made in Psychiatric Hospitals* and *The Falling Leaf: Aerial Dropped Propaganda, 1914–1968*. Stepping outside the imposed structures of predetermined distinctions between art and craft, or pure and applied, he opened ways of engaging with arts cross-culturally.¹⁵ He saw the exhibitions and their associated publications as part of a wider means of engagement, providing an aesthetic and educational armature around which smaller displays, film programs and events might be organized.¹⁶

In Europe his exhibitions moved east. He writes about his early interest in German Expressionism. The overlapping aesthetic battle between Fascism and Communism in the pre-World War II era led him to German and Russian art in the contemporary context. And Russia led to Mexico by way of Mayakovsky and Eisenstein, resulting in the 1981 exhibition of the muralist José Clemente Orozco. From 1981 to 1994 Elliott curated a series of exhibitions on contemporary Indian art. He explicitly saw these Indian exhibitions and their catalogues as a substantial project analogous to building a collection. As a whole they were designed to have a long-term impact that might change people's attitudes. He determinedly interspersed them with other exhibitions so that they could be in dialogue with other projects, overlapping in unpredictable and potentially productive ways.¹⁷ Conversations made into exhibitions and exhibitions being part of conversations and providing a resource for his own curatorial agendas.

His next exhibitions moved to engage with the contemporary art of China and Japan. He studied all the time, always researching, but also seizing opportunities and looking for resources through collaboration. He developed two simultaneous Chinese exhibitions at the time of the

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 28

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Referring to existing categorizations and distinctions he writes that he “wanted to step outside prescribed taste so to compare what one knew with other things that either crossed such disciplines or never even approached them.” *Ibid.*, p. 29

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36

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apparent opening up of China to the West. Looking again to Germany he found a partner in the newly opened Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin. Working with co-curator Elizabeth Mepham he produced *China Avant-Garde* for HKW and they organized an additional exhibition *Silent Energy* for MoMA. When I went into *Silent Energy* for the first-time, Huang Yong Ping's *Yellow Peril* (1993), had immediate impact and became locked in my memory. The visitor walked between two imperial-yellow silk-lined canvas tents above which hung a vivarium of one thousand locusts and five scorpions—a visceral work of art. The contradictory emotions of empathy, repulsion and fascination evoked by the work echoed beyond its specific reference to masters and slavery.

AN AUSTRALIAN/ OXFORD/CHINESE/A CONJUNCTION

In reading *Art and Trousers*, I could not help thinking about something that on the surface appears to be completely different and other. The mortuary rituals and ceremonial performances of the Yolngu people of eastern Arnhem Land require the sequencing of songs, paintings, dances, sand sculptures and intonations of names associated with different Yolngu 'countries'. The connections that can be made are almost infinite and depend on the particular purpose of the ritual and who the participants are. Links can be made on the basis of kinship, of moiety, of Ancestral Being, of animal species, of sound or even colour. There is a multiplicity of ways of making connections and changing directions some of which seem to be almost arbitrary to the observer. The structure of each performance has a particular logic, but it is hard to predict the content of each step in advance. In retrospect, however, every step that is taken adds coherence to an evolving whole.¹⁸ Somehow this has synergies with Elliott's curatorial trajectory.

MoMA Oxford's Chinese exhibitions overlapped with a major exhibition of Indigenous Australian Art at the Hayward Gallery in London *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians*. The cover of the *Aratjara* catalogue was a Yolngu ceremonial painting made on bark and collected by the anthropologist Donald Thomson in 1937. The MoMA exhibitions and *Aratjara* both brought mixed reviews.¹⁹ And one by Tom Lubbock in *The Independent* covered both exhibitions.²⁰ Ostensibly, a somewhat negative review of *Aratjara*, it provided the excuse for an equally negative review of MoMA's Chinese exhibitions.²¹ It can be read to exemplify the positions from the West that Elliott was trying to challenge. To him, "it seemed completely ridiculous that modern or contemporary art worthy of consideration could be limited by its location, [or] ethnicity."²² But Lubbock, referring to *Aratjara*, opined: "this art mostly wasn't made within the traditions of modern or indeed ancient

¹⁸ Howard Morphy, *Journey to the Crocodile's Nest*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Press, 1984, shows how meaningful connections are made in a Yolngu funeral ceremony

¹⁹ For my own reflections on the reviews of *Aratjara* see Howard Morphy, 'Aboriginal art in a global context', in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the prism of the local*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 211–39

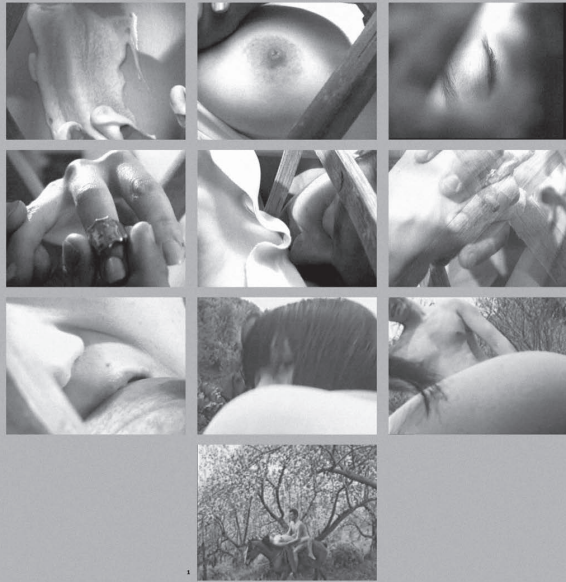
²⁰ Tom Lubbock, 'ART / Lost in the Outback: Tom Lubbock on "Aratjara: Art of the First Australians" at the Hayward Gallery', *The Independent*, 2 August 1993; <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art-lost-in-the-outback-tom-lubbock-on-aratjara-art-of-the-first-australians-at-the-hayward-gallery-1458898.html>

²¹ Elliott, p.47

²² *Ibid.*, p.12

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Heaven and Earth
Contemporary Art From
the Center of Asia



**The Best of Times,
The Worst of Times**
Contemporary Art along
the Post-Soviet Silk Road



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Western Art. It is, as they say, other.”²³ It is both in the selection of comparators and in the slipping from different to other that there is a problem. To be fair to Lubbock, some essays in the *Aratjara* catalogue deliberately place the works outside Western discourse while simultaneously placing them within the category of fine art—a position that Elliott acknowledges is part of contemporary discourse. He sketches two perspectives on cross-cultural engagement. On the one hand:

... difference is for the most part attractive, necessary, and can be learned about and celebrated as an enhancement of common humanity without much threat of its being homogenized. The other view – a defensive and in some cases “genetic” position – advocates that difference may not be fully “understood” or mediated by anyone outside the culture in question because outsiders do not have the native linguistic, emotional and, perhaps, intellectual capacity to appreciate its complexity.²⁴

He concludes that his choice has always been to follow the first path because he sees he has no alternative. And indeed, as an anthropologist neither do I! David Elliott’s engagement with Asia brought him closer to Australia and to America as contemporary Asian art moved west. In the 1990s he developed a close relationship with Vishakha Desai, curator of Asian Art at the Boston Museum of Arts and subsequently in 1990 director of the Asia Society in New York, where two years previously *Dreamings* had been held. In 1992 he visited Australia at the invitation of Leon Paroissien, then director of Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary art, and moved on to attend the first Asia-Pacific Triennial curated overall by Caroline Turner in 1993.

In conversations I had with Elliott after his return the idea emerged of co-curating an exhibition on contemporary Australian art that would reflect the changes that we sensed were beginning to take place in the country. Our aim was to build on the emerging recognition of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian art as being in a primary sense contemporary.²⁵ Working on the exhibition allowed me to observe him at work, visiting artists in their studios, extensively discussing the project with curators in different institutions, working with galleries to pull together collections of an artist’s work, and finding contributors to write essays in the catalogue. The exhibition *In Place (Out of Time): Contemporary Art in Australia* opened at MoMA, Oxford in September 1997. In one memorable space (a high-ceilinged relatively narrow gallery) Imants Tiller’s *Izkliede* (1994) from his *Diaspora* series – a wall of sinister images of oppression – faced onto Gordon Bennett’s powerful works from his *Home décor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen)* (1997) series, engaging with the contradictions of modernism from an Indigenous Australian perspective.²⁶ And together those works contained a story within a story for those who remember *Nine Ricochets* (1990).²⁷

²³ Lubbock, op cit.

²⁴ Elliott, p. 13

²⁵ Ibid., p. 48. Stephanie Radok in her essay ‘The ethnographic present: Aboriginal art – A gift that keeps on giving’, *Artlink*, March 2009 quotes that our intention to demonstrate that the category Aboriginal art includes “in an ethnically-defined category works that would equally fit into that dominant unmarked category – contemporary fine art” thus challenging and changing the category of the contemporary

²⁶ Ian McLean’s reflections on the significance of the paintings engaging as they did with the contradictions of Australia’s entanglement with modernism, shows how relevant they were to the concept of the exhibition, *Gordon Bennett’s Home Decor: the joker in the pack*, *Law Text Culture* 4, 1998, pp. 287-307; <https://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol4/iss1/18>

²⁷ For more details of the exhibition see the catalogue, edited by Rebecca Coates and Howard Morphy, *In Place (Out of Time): Contemporary Art in Australia*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1997

AFTER OXFORD

In Place (Out of Time) was for both of us our concluding exhibition in Oxford. We went our separate ways. I returned to Australia and David Elliott went to Stockholm. My engagement with him influenced my subsequent work. I was privileged to become the Director of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University in succession to Nicolas Thomas, who had written the catalogue essay on Gordon Bennett for the MoMA exhibition. I was able to work with Caroline Turner who moved from Queensland to Canberra and also formed a partnership with Nigel Lendon, both of whom shared many of the same ideas as Elliott explored. Nigel and I co-curated a series of projects that combined workshops with exhibitions and catalogues that were inclusive of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. I was able to work with artists who I had been introduced to through the MoMA, Oxford exhibition and I gained many ideas about what was possible through the short time I spent working with David Elliott. And I was able to reconnect with him when he curated the 17th Biennale of Sydney in 2010, *The Beauty of Distance—Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age*, a topic that resonated with me.

Through *Art and Trousers*, the reader can follow Elliott's work with Asian art broadly conceived through a set of powerful essays that provide the rationale for his work with particular artists and shows his understanding of their work and its significance. The voices of the artists are always present and become an integral part of the wider discourse that is reflected in the themes of his exhibitions and biennales.

Through the essays written at particular moments in time, readers are able to place themselves within a trajectory of change. In a sense he is 'making' contemporary art—researching and redefining—rather than following or predicting the next best thing (taste-making).²⁸ Some of the essays are quite disconcerting to the contemporary reader who fails to recognize the present in the past, and others make us wary that things have hardly changed at all. There is an optimism about the role that art and artists can play in the world, the intelligence, intuition and humanity of the artists who have made the work in, and for, this biennale is not directed towards providing any solutions. Art does not work in that way. Rather, it gives inspiration by its example. In their critical, sardonic, humorous, or iconoclastic views of the world, in their ability to see and think outside the prisons into which we so often willingly confine ourselves, and in their clarity and commitment to truth in art, these artists energize us to go a step further—to experience and analyze more keenly for ourselves the causes and effects of life, the very fountainhead of creation.²⁹

These are the concluding thoughts to the opening essay to the catalogue of the first Kyiv Biennale, *The Best of Times, The Worst of Times—Rebirth and Apocalypse in Contemporary Art*. But it does not take long for our optimism to be confronted. In introducing the essay Elliott refers to the significance of Kyiv by placing it in deep time; "its historic position as a bridge between north and south, east and west could make sense in terms of contemporary art."³⁰ But many of the works in the Kyiv Biennale can almost be read to signify a reversal of time, a warning that what we imagine has been achieved is at times a fragile illusion.

²⁸ I am grateful to Robyn McKenzie for making me emphasize this point

²⁹ 'The Best of Times the Worst of Times Contemporary Art along the Post-Soviet Silk Road', David Elliott, *Art and Trousers*, p. 157

³⁰ Elliott, p. 133



The Mumbai artist Jitish Kallats' work *Covering Letter* (2012), was one of the works exhibited in Kyiv in 2012. The work comprises a walk-through installation in which words and facsimiles are projected onto a mist screen, where they appear and disappear as the viewer walks through. What is projected is Gandhi's letter to 'Herr Hitler' on the eve of World War II pleading for him to prevent a "war which may reduce the world to a savage state." In an essay on the same work for the catalogue of an exhibition six years on Elliott writes how it "deftly joins the worlds present with India's past in again embodying a situation in which violence should have no place."³¹ A message which, in Kiev, resonates today.

CONCLUSION

Art and Trousers—Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Asian Art is a book you cannot do justice to in a single sitting. It contains essays that you want to return to again and again. David Elliott concludes helpfully in his Epilogue with what is essentially his own review of what he has achieved and just how essential the juxtapositions of images in the text are to 'reading' the book. In referring to the concluding illustrations of the previous chapter by the Indian artist Bharti Kher — *The Hunter and the Prophet* (2004) and *The Lady with an Ermine* (2012), he begins: "And so, on this last visual note—a balancing act contrived by an established female artist between a painting by Leonardo da Vinci, a contemporary sculpture of a giant Indian 'deity', and an ironic statement about culture and individuality that extends far beyond its initial context—this book draws to a close."

David Elliott made his mark by bringing the contemporary art of eastern Europe, China, India into the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, and then perhaps ironically was provided with the opportunities to move his practice out of Europe from a launching pad in Stockholm to the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. His life, so far, can be seen as a single grand research project bringing the world's art together in a peripatetic journey with reflections back to Oxford, "a flaneur within the fabric of so many fascinating cultures."³²

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177

³² *Ibid.*, p. 49