

Editorial

Just over a decade ago I notionally proposed the phenomenal emergence of a cultural Wallace Line separating the greater Asian region from that of Australasia, following the disclosure in the Singapore media by the artistic director of a major quinquennial art event that the proposition of having to travel (the extent of) the distance to Australia from Europe—to advance his research in the selection of artists—was nauseating. His additional criticism asserted that Australian contemporary art was a mimicry of the Euro-American canon, effectively second-hand, and having already successfully visited Southeast Asian countries (the inference being that the art there *was* original due to its ‘Asian-ness’) that through this imperfect sojourn further south he doubted he would discover anything advantageous, echoing an enduring and pervasive doctrine of his antecedents, allied by a similarly abiding Gallic posture that had considered Australian Aboriginal art to be “primitive” rather than contemporary, and hence equally inapropos and immaterial.

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) was a British humanist, naturalist, geographer and social critic whose theories of evolution by natural selection predated those of Charles Darwin. In 1859, after many years of research in the Malay Archipelago, he proposed a boundary line between the Oriental and Australian faunal regions—separating the ecozones of Asia and Australasia—becoming known as the Wallace Line.

This notional fault-line has been drawn out in ensuing years, not so much by either disaffection or lack of desire to cross it, rather by its pervasive ethos, typified by curator-art critic Okwui Enwezor’s introduction to his 2008 *Biennale of Sydney* keynote address with a mischievous surmise, that he felt like he had arrived “at the end of the earth” (I quietly proposed that he continue south to Tasmania), a view not dissimilar to Hou Hanru’s 2012 *Adelaide Festival Artist Week* jocular provocation, of why would he want to come to the “bottom of the world”—its most recent public protraction revealed in an Australian newspaper concerning the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art’s then forthcoming Gerhard Richter survey, where the article referred to the Gallery’s conversations with private collectors and international galleries regarding the loan of artworks, during which one of the latter’s directors countered with “surprise that Australia *actually had* art galleries” (my emphasis).

Concurrent with this ideology have been the undulating dispositions of the *Biennale of Sydney*, the third oldest international biennial and the first to be established in the Asia-Pacific region, and Brisbane’s *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* first presented in 1993. While the latter is recognised as a pathfinder in its early editions connecting Australia and the region’s art historical and contemporary milieu, the *Biennale of Sydney*’s protracted deference towards the Euro-American has sustained few interruptions—the most notable being Charles Merewether’s embedded focus on post-Soviet Central Asian states and the Middle East in *Zones of Contact* in 2006 (his curatorial vision conceived on the Chinese island of Hainan), and to a lesser degree, David Elliott’s *The Beauty Of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age*—now potentially, partially offset by the appointment of the first Asian artistic director in its forty-five year history, Tokyo’s Mori Art Museum Chief Curator, Mami Kataoka, for 2018.

A parallel history to this chronology is the significant transformation of Southeast and East Asian art markets, museum and institutional infrastructure, practitioner mobility and visibility, and (to invoke Patrick Flores) “the density of discourse... the region now strongly placed to mediate any representation of it from without”—a compelling example being Singapore. When I lived there in 1990 there were few visual artists engaging ‘the contemporary’, materially exploring Asian- and self-identity *sans* the postmodern, as poor cousins to the performing arts, with minimal museum and education infrastructure, attended by a lingering postcolonial cultural ubiquity through the Goethe Institute, British Council and Alliance Française. Exactly one generation later this environment could not be any more dissimilar, with envisioned State policy investing enormous amounts of capital into expanded infrastructure and events, and its artists and curators internationally recognised. Though this period saw varying degrees of engaging the postmodern, ‘the contemporary’ seems now to have reverted to type, with a restored State and individual pursuit of ‘Asian-ness’ and ‘Asian identity’ at the forefront.

Underlining this de facto demarcation and new global focus, signature events such as the *Singapore Biennale*, *Asian Art Biennial*, *Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale* and *Shanghai Biennale*, and the recent *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* in recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have been predetermined in their principle of consolidating and asserting the presentation of Asian art, incidentally or otherwise at the exclusion of the Other’s other; for example, the directives of the 2013 *Singapore Biennale* sought to create a “distinctive Asian identity”, its 2016 successor locating Southeast Asia as a vantage point through which to “raise the profile of our region’s contemporary art and artists at a *much more intense level*” (my emphasis). Both editions were defined by regional curatoriums, presenting Asian artists only. Taiwan’s 6th *Asian Art Biennial* in 2017, its mission to explore the cultural perspectives of Asia, presented a majority of artists/collectives from the region. Japan’s 2014 *Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale* presented artists from twenty-one Asian countries, while *Sunshower*, held at Tokyo’s Mori Art Museum and National Art Centre also in 2017, presented artworks by eighty-six artist/artist groups from the ten ASEAN member countries, aiming to corral the region’s artistic dynamism and diversity, its media promotion proposing as metaphor the regional meteorological phenomenon of a sunshower for post-WWII decolonisation, democratisation and internationalisation.

To one side of this cultural divide “South East Asia” nonetheless presents a contested notion; as a distinguishable entity it has historically been determined by European colonial worldviews and their eventual disengagement (half of ASEAN’s countries did not exist prior to the Second World War), the ensuing reality a disarranged aggregation of differences in culture, race, politics and religion without a “continuous horizon” (this, improbably suggested by the Guggenheim Museum’s 2013 exhibition *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia*); the incontestable consequence now being that such inscribed representations of a geopolitical sector, such as “South East Asia” (or “The Middle East”), while seeking to intensify notions of homogeneity and identity—reminiscent of the “Asian values” push in the 1980s—are open to be inclined towards introspectivity, at least.

The disjunctions presented by this notional boundary line issue inevitable considerations of connectedness, accord, facility, perception and incorporation, etc. The 2018 *Biennale of Sydney, Superposition: Equilibrium and Engagement* proposes a panoramic view of how opposing interpretations can come together in a state of equilibrium, inviting an imagined bridging of this however real partition. This issue’s cover image, *Super Rat*, by the Japanese artist group Chim↑Pom, who present these ‘super rats’ as a symbol of (their) ever-evolving ways of coexistence with human beings, advances an additional, apropos superposition of equilibrium and engagement, for our shared contemplation.