

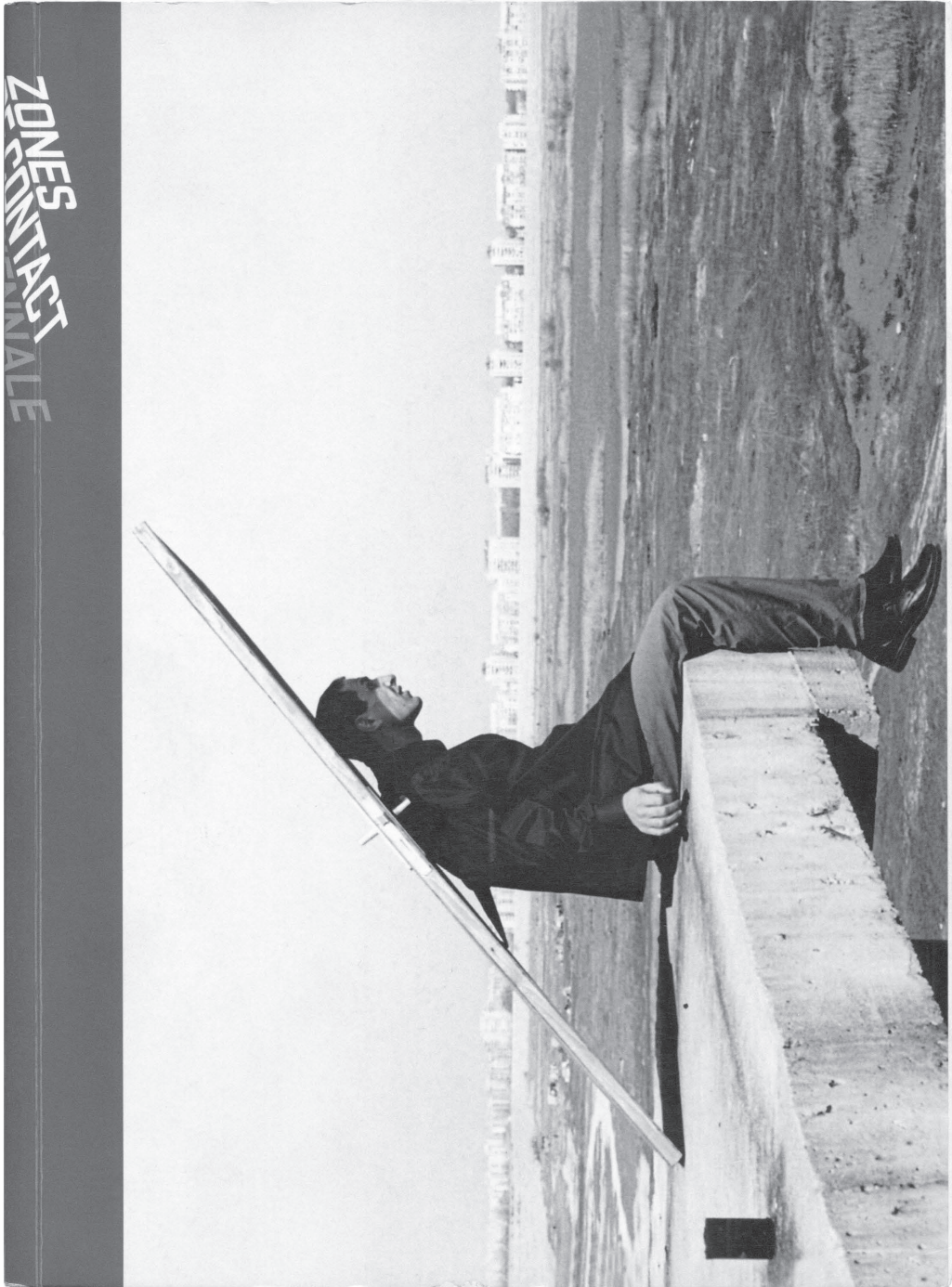
Contact Zones: *From Russia to China* *The Silk Road Revisited*

If sixteen years after the Biennale of Sydney: *Zones of Contact* in 2006, we were asked to reimagine its conceptual framework and horizons, we would need to recognize the fundamental realignment between countries internationally that has occurred. Some of these changes include Australia better acknowledging Asian culture as being very much part of, if not integral to the character of Australian life; the increasingly powerful geo-political influence of China through the old Silk Road of Central Asia and across Asia (including Australia); and thirdly, the diminishing force of Western art and culture as an international standard and arbiter.

I had conceived the idea of *Zones of Contact* initially while visiting Hong Kong, which at the time was still a gateway and meeting point of different cultures East and West. I had thought this idea might develop further but, as I worked my way through Asia, it seemed sufficiently appropriate and a promise of human connectivity that would cross borders. The idea of zones of contact had multiple implications for the promise of cultural exchange, free of an ideological imperative or demand by one ethnicity over another. In my Introduction to the Biennale catalogue I had written of "a reflexive relation of the lived experience of the now across culture... shaped by the uneasy contradictions between cultures, the unstable transient zone of inclusion and exclusion of peoples... resolutely speaks to expose the fault-lines of the present in which the past persists and the future is uncertain."¹

Earlier Biennales of Sydney had seemed at the time predominantly Eurocentric, except for Anthony Bond's *Boundary Rider* in 1992. By thinking about contemporary art across borders and not in terms of being bracketed by identity politics, Bond's Biennale had broken with the dominant Western ideological paradigms, seeking rather a practice based on exchange between "social interaction and belief," "perception and the material world," "sign and signifier."²

Immediately preceding 2004, the question of nation-building and nationalism seemed for many at the time, an almost distant and obsolete issue. There was rather the hope that the recognition of one another as equal and a transnational dialogue could build respect, alliances and exchange, regardless of ethnic differences or national borders. Hence "zones of contact" in 2004 advocated extending connections, correspondences and affinities between peoples and artists across geo-political and social divides. This was the guiding philosophy and concept underlying the two years research and preparation leading up to the Biennale of Sydney in 2006.



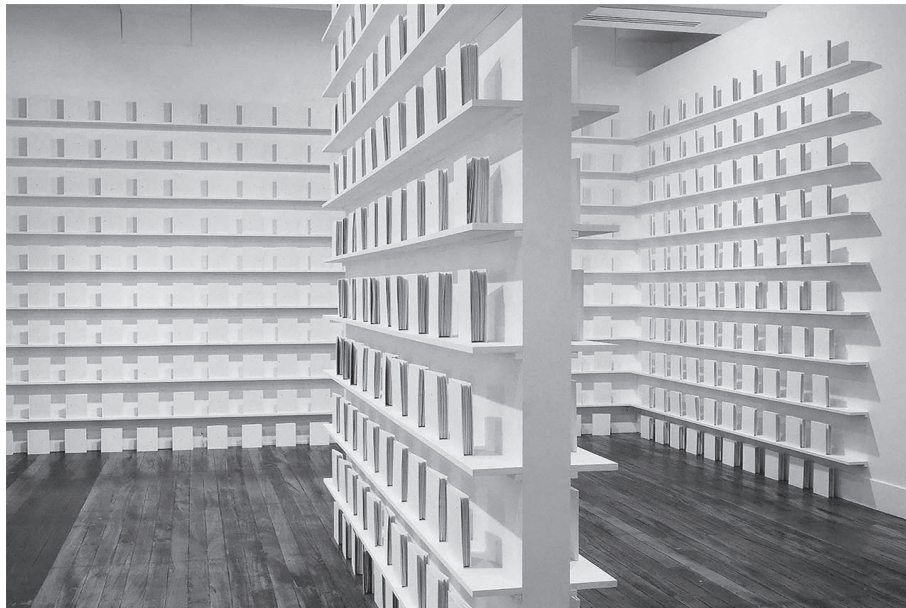
ZONES
CONTACT
FINALE

This had been intimated and shaped by the preceding thirty years of social and cultural changes that included rethinking the terms that would best reflect the relations of cultural exchange. Chipping away at the construction of the hegemonic and the notion of a dominant culture or defining centre, had been an ongoing endeavour since the 1960s. Some of these issues had been raised in different permeations over the years, such as the critique of the centre/periphery constructions of the world, or holistic theories of internationalism, then globalism. The advent of post-coloniality and the founding of both *Subaltern Studies* in India, 1982 and *Third Text* in London, 1987 led to a kind of writing against the grain, seeking to restore history to the subordinated. The editorial of *Third Text*, at the time it was launched, proposed that the journal was dedicated to the study of the exclusionary zones of centre and periphery, and to challenge the Eurocentric and ethnocentric notions of aesthetic criteria that marginalized—and at times continue to neglect—the work of culturally diverse practitioners.³ This was further enhanced by the writings of Homi Bhabha, as *The Location of Culture*, published in 1994, in which he advances the concept of hybridity in cross-cultural exchange and that of an interstitial space.

By 1998 Nicolas Bourriaud had published his book *Relational Aesthetics*, a concept developed over a number of years prior to the exhibition *Traffic* that he curated at the CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux in 1996. Bourriaud would then publish *Radical Aesthetics* in 2009, that aimed to define the emergence of the first global modernity, based on translation and nomadic forms, pitted against the postmodern aesthetics based on identities. *Relational Aesthetics* was subsequently critiqued by Claire Bishop who, in re-reading some of the artists Bourriaud discussed, arrived at different conclusions. She draws upon Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), who argue that a fully functioning democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are sustained, not erased, and that new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate. Bishop wrote that without such antagonism, there is only the imposed consensus of authoritarian order—a total suppression of debate and discussion—which is inimical to democracy.⁴

Surpassing Eurocentrism enables one to see the differences and complex processes of cultural exchange between peoples not only in Asian countries but, also across the Middle East and a broader Europe beyond its Western borders. This would include artists from both Central and Eastern Europe, as well as a deeper appreciation of Islamic culture and both its breadth and a recognition that it is very much a part of contemporary art today. We would need also to redress the breadth and strength of global First Nations and indigenous movements and voices that resound especially through the island peoples of the Pacific. This was clearly shown in the Brook Andrew curated Biennale of Sydney: *NIRIN* in 2020, an artist- and First Nations-led event that focused on “the edge” as the location of connection.

The critical sphere of contemporary art and culture needs to take on board the shift in the geo-political dynamics reshaping the character of cultural exchange today. The democracy/political uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa—the Arab Spring—significantly altered the nation-power dynamics that fuelled a populist and reactionary nationalism in Europe. This led to the political, religious and ethnic repression of others, including the ostracization of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. In such a climate the cause for any kind of regionalist or internationalist approach was swiftly rejected as irrelevant, if not denounced as threatening to local national interests and needs. Furthermore, we need to recognize the influence and breadth of Islamic culture that has been misidentified with the Islamic State group.



CHARLES MEREWETHER



In the post-Arab Spring years, significant infrastructural and artistic development of art has occurred across the Middle East, augmented by the Sharjah Art Foundation, the Abraaj Group, biennales in Sharjah and Istanbul, Art Dubai, and publications such as *Bedouin* and *Canvas*. Complementary initiatives were instigated in the West, such as that begun by the Victoria and Albert Museum London in 2008 when it opened the museum's newly renovated Gallery of Islamic Art and launched the Jameel Prize.⁵ For those advocating the need to strengthen the points and terms of reference in regard to contemporary art practice, the Jameel Prize, held every two years, was designed to award "an artist whose contemporary practice emphasized the importance of 'Islamic traditions of art, craft and design'."⁶ Not only did this challenge the ideologues of separation but would show the increasing strength of contemporary practices developing in the Islamic world and relations with other forms of contemporary art elsewhere.⁷ This breadth of influence extended from the Middle East to its diaspora, including Central Asia, where Islamic faith is a constituent part of those countries and to the region of Xinjiang, Northwest China, in which the majority of the twelve million plus Uyghurs are of Muslim faith.⁸

In the second half of these remarks, I wish to focus on what I see as the implications of a geo-political shift in which Russia has been displaced by China as a preeminent global power. And although a new alliance was struck between Russia and China, when Russia gave its blessing to China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2015, it is China that is now able to call the shots over substantial parts of the world, far beyond that of Western Europe and the Anglo-American sphere of North America and the UK.⁹ In fact, it makes *Zones of Contact* seem rather utopian in its assuming some kind of equal interconnectedness and community of difference. These changes have been exacerbated by the growing recognition and urgency around climate change, an increase in ecological disasters as well as the persistent COVID-19 pandemic that has continued to spread and decimate countries, as well as the international acknowledgement of the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement in their own countries. Reimagined today, *Zones of Contact* would become an urgent recognition of such challenges now facing the world.

In 2013 the Chinese leader Xi Jinping unveiled what became known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹⁰ It covered more than sixty-eight countries, encompassing 4.4 billion people and an estimated forty percent of the global GDP in 2017. The "belt" included countries on the original Silk Road across Central Asia, West Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.¹¹ The BRI would create a very different dynamic of interconnectedness in building a cohesive economic area with both a hard infrastructure, such as rail and road links, and soft infrastructure of trade agreements and a common commercial legal structure with a court system to police the agreements. It would expand trade and increase cultural exchanges, constructing a powerful vector in shaping the profile of contemporary international culture. Three belts were proposed. The Southern belt would run from China through South and Southeast Asia and on to the Indian Ocean through Pakistan. It also includes the South Pacific region, most especially Papua New Guinea. The Central belt would pass through Central Asia and West Asia to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean. The Northern belt would go through Central Asia, Belarus and Russia to Europe. This Northern belt integrates Central Asia with China, featuring a US\$9 billion domestic stimulus plan in Kazakhstan. Given the name *Nurly Zhol* (Bright Path) and announced in November 2014, the infrastructure program included the development and modernization of roads, railways, ports, IT infrastructure, education and civil services. Kazakhstan enthusiastically embraced its partnership with China, projecting itself as the 'buckle' in the BRI project.

END OF SOVIET DOMINANCE: THE SILK ROAD REVISITED

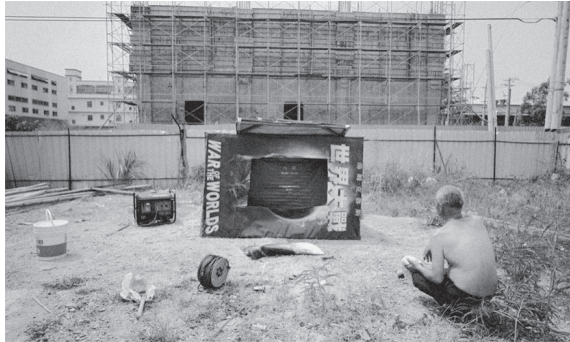
Until the end of the Soviet period in 1991, the borders between China and the Soviet Socialist Republics were unstable. After 1991 with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, China began to settle its border disputes with and promote support of Central Asia. This ultimately led to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), agreed upon by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 2002.

We may think of many artists who explored if not questioned and challenged the hegemonic presence and effects of the Soviet Union/Russia in Central Asia. These artists reveal what was embedded in their country's cultural history and address the legacy and condition of the daily lives of people. One example is the Kyzyl (RED) Tractor group, one of whose founders was Said Atabekov (b. 1965, Bes Terek, Uzbekistan). Founded in the early 1990s, the group drew upon Sufi, Shamanic and nomadic traditions, seeking to revive local indigenous traditions with its indigenous material, as distinct from the imposing Soviet model.¹² Or we may view the work of the Kazakh artist Almagul Menlibaeva (b. 1969, Almaty), for example her multi-channel video *Kurchatov* (2012), an unerring portrait of the devastating effects on the people who were born and lived near the Soviet nuclear tests, conducted from 1949 for more than forty years around Semipalatinsk in Northeast Kazakhstan. Alternatively, Kyrgyz artists Gulnara Kasmalieva (b. 1960, Bishkek) and Muratbek Djumaliev (b. 1965, Bishkek) capture a country in the moment of change with their five-channel video *A New Silk Road: 'Algorithm of Survival and Hope'* (2007).¹³ They, like many other citizens of their country, witnessed the transformation of their country from the rise of the export trade using ancient transportation routes, most importantly the Silk Road, and the migration of people beyond their country to live elsewhere.

This video by Kasmalieva and Djumaliev was filmed along the highways and in small villages connecting China through Kyrgyzstan to the Western markets—one of the routes that still forms the Silk Road. They show how residents of the Kyrgyz farms and small towns exhibit entrepreneurial ingenuity in finding ways to bond with and benefit from the truck drivers of different countries. Subtitled *'Algorithm of Survival and Hope,'* the five videos track the passage of a caravan of dilapidated trucks carrying scrap metal to China in exchange for cheap products, such as clothing. The dilapidated Soviet trucks, continually breaking down as they haul the scrap metal, are shown in contrast to the caravans of shiny, behemoth Chinese eighteen-wheelers barreling through the narrow passes, filled with cheaply manufactured goods destined for European markets. Reflecting upon the relationship between overlapping histories, and both globalization and local identity, they capture the determination and resourcefulness that define these people in the mountainous, poverty-stricken regions of Central Asia.

The work of Kasmalieva and Djumaliev challenges the advent of a burgeoning economy that is based on the modernization of the Silk Road as the new hub of transnational exchange between China, Russia and the West. The Silk Road is seen as a symbol of the complex process of "migration, survival and transformation" that has taken place in the Kyrgyz Republic over the last one hundred years. Kyrgyz people were originally nomads but, in the last two decades, with their independence from the Soviet Union and transition to a free-market economy, their lives have been transformed. The Silk Road itself reflects this history. Statues of former communist leaders Mao and Stalin still remain by the side of the road, and a runway for military airplanes now exists as a parking

Contact Zones: *From Russia to China The Silk Road Revisited*



CHARLES MEREWETHER



lot for trucks, with formerly nomadic shepherds providing food and shelter. But watching the video we witness the politically and economically harsh realities of life in Kyrgyzstan, where traditional nomadic lifestyles undergo drastic changes, transformed under former Soviet Communist rule and today tossed by the winds of global capitalism. Indeed, the central message of *The New Silk Road* takes on a wider poignancy as the entire world begins to reel from an economic crisis that seems to know no boundaries.

China's growing domestic energy demand and their expanding external markets for finished goods has become increasingly critical to the need for a greater presence in and trade agreements with Central Asian countries.¹⁴ China has also been keen to invest in and import fossil fuels (including oil and gas, uranium and other minerals) from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.¹⁵ This was reason as to why China was eager to demarcate and control its border with Kazakhstan as well with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Mongolia.¹⁶ Moreover, there was increasing unrest in Xinjiang that, lying in the northwest of China, shared its border with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Russia, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is therefore unsurprising that Xinjiang's status of relative autonomy from China, like Tibet, ended after the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949.¹⁷ As we see now, more than seventy years later, this has led to a history of the systematic destruction of Uyghur culture and faith with full-scale detention, re-education camps and human rights abuse of rape, torture and genocide, as China swamps the region with its own people.¹⁸ In 2019, it was estimated that Chinese authorities had detained up to 1.5 million people in internment camps, mostly Uyghurs, as well as Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and other ethnic Turkic Muslims.

THE DEAD WEIGHT OF CHINA

There are few Uyghur or other artists who have been able to respond directly to this situation. Many have gone into exile and reduced to silence. How does one write about an artist whose work would seem to respond, even indirectly, without placing them in jeopardy of reprisal? One may think of the artist Zhao Zhao who was born in Xinjiang, but no longer lives there.¹⁹ He moved to Beijing after graduating in 2003 from the Department of Oil Painting in his home city's Xinjiang Institute of Art. At the Beijing Film Academy, Zhao Zhao began to study film direction but, in the following year, he met Ai Weiwei to become his assistant for the subsequent eleven years. Although of different generations, they had much to share. Weiwei had spent sixteen years from 1961, living in exile in Shihezi, Xinjiang. Ai gave him an assignment to video document with one-minute frames at measured intervals of every fifty metres of the forty-five kilometre road that divides the city along its east-west axis with Tiananmen Square. It became a conceptual video work of Ai, titled *Chang'an Boulevard* from 2004.

By 2010, Zhao Zhao had begun to actively participate in exhibitions and in the following year held an exhibition of new work at Chambers Fine Art in Beijing. The exhibition included the installation *Officer* (2011), a limestone statue of a Chinese police officer, more than eight metres tall, whose badge number corresponds to the date of Ai Weiwei's arrest by the Chinese police. The statue was displayed toppled over, lying in pieces on the floor. By 2012, Zhao Zhao had begun *Again* which he exhibited the following year. It was a cube of stone blocks cut from desecrated Buddha sculptures. He had bought the blocks from a local market after the statues had been semi-destroyed by looters, with their heads, hands and feet cut off and the remaining parts sold. Zhao Zhao reconstituted these fragmentary pieces as a block and a new work of art. It became the embodiment of a history of the destruction of the original sacred objects and a disappearing China.

CHARLES MEREWETHER

During these years Zhao Zhao returned on occasion to his home region of Xinjiang. These trips inspired him to produce a number of works, including a video *Project Taklamakan*, initiated in 2007 and continued up until 2017, when the artist brought a camel and its keeper from the far western region of Xinjiang to Tang Contemporary Art Gallery in Beijing. The exhibition, *Desert Camel*, was a coda to his major work *Project Taklamakan* (2015–16) that involved himself and a team of thirty people travelling 4,000 kilometers from Beijing to the northern part of the Xinjiang's Taklamakan Desert. They carried with them a hundred-kilometre long cable and a double-doored refrigerator. In order to pass strict inspection systems at the border of this remote region, Zhao Zhao impersonated a contractor and an advertising director during these government inspections. After arriving in Northern city of Tailun, Zhao Zhao and his team then connected the electricity to a household in the Uyghur community, trailing the cable out toward the centre of the desert. This journey took twenty-three days and used ten transformers, in order to prevent any loss in power transmission. At the end of it, the cable successfully powered the refrigerator full of Xinjiang beer for twenty-four hours in the desert. Through interacting with the Uyghur family, sourcing funding for the project and passing the strict government inspections as part of the project, Zhao Zhao found multiple ways to actively participate and intervene in society.

If *Zones of Contact* were to be held in 2022, it would need to recognize such shifts in the geo-political dynamics shaping the character of cultural exchange. As I have suggested, while the presence of China in Central Asia and Xinjiang should be differentiated, they should be also seen broadly together. Then, local cultures with their beliefs and traditions can be accepted, irrespective of the current changes taking place across Central Asia and in the larger schemes of things that are driving Russian and now Chinese imperatives. It is clear the fragility with which the recognition of this difference is sustained. Moreover, it should remind us of the region's proximity to Australia. For while Australia may seem to have an awkward cultural affinity or alliance with Southeast Asia and the South Pacific region, the geopolitical relations with China are simply too strong to deny. It will be up to Australia to find an accord that allows for political differences while maintaining economic agreements of trade and exchange.

The concept of internationalism was once a structure that defined the Biennale, a term that seemed innocuous and unbiased. It promised dialogue and exchange and, as much, a recognition of commonality and connectivity between distant communities. But this overwhelming rubric of internationalism, in fact, diminished any relative autonomy of the local and regional that might counter, hold in check or relativize the international.

I return to the original question of how a Biennale of Sydney in 2022 would be different from *Zones of Contact* in 2006. It would be, in short, to construct the international through the local and regional. This will give substance to the international, informed by the changes and issues confronting the local and regional. Connectivity then begins with what one brings from the local and from the horizontality of regional encounters, connections and exchanges. If one wishes to enhance and keep the spirit of internationalism alive, we need recognize a point of view, a locality from where one stands, engages and make choices.

Notes

¹ Charles Merewether, 'Taking Place: Acts of Survival for a Time to Come', *Biennale of Sydney: Zones of Contact* (exhibition catalogue), Biennale of Sydney, 2006, p. 45.

² See Anthony Bond, 'Notes on the Catalogue and Exhibition', *The Boundary Rider, 9th Biennale of Sydney*, Biennale of Sydney, 1992, pp. 14–19



CHARLES MEREWETHER



³ Similarly, exhibitions like *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* at the Museum of Modern Art (1984–85) and *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette (1989) played a crucial role for many in broadening the map of cultural and artistic exchange. This was the subject of James Clifford's analysis with *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988

⁴ Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October* 110, 2004, pp. 51–79. In mid-2004, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia all joined the European Union

⁵ An earlier version of this discussion was published in 'The Jameel Prize: a shift of alternate worlds', *Contemporary Practices*, vol. 5, 2009, pp. 82–91; <http://www.contemporarypractices.net/essays/volume5/reviews>

⁶ The Jameel Prize offered the winner £25,000. There were over one hundred nominations in the first year of the prize, and nine were eventually shortlisted and exhibited

⁷ This is also true of the Sharjah Biennial alongside that of certain commercial art galleries in the Middle East and the Gulf region, as well as magazines such as *Bidoun*

⁸ Now, more than one million Uyghurs live outside China, mostly in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkey, with much smaller numbers in the United States and Europe. The Uyghurs had started to become Islamized by the sixteenth century

⁹ The 2015 agreement linked the Silk Road Economic Belt, the continental component of the BRI, with the Eurasian Economic Union, the Russian-led regional integration project of which Belarus is also a member

¹⁰ An excellent account of China and the BRI is to be found in Peter Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads: The Present and Future of the World*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018

¹¹ Besides this, there has also been the development of the maritime Silk Road, that includes Vietnam, Indonesia and Pakistan

¹² See Chapter 9 of my book, *In the Sphere of the Soviets, Essays on the Cultural Legacy of the Soviet Union*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021

¹³ *Ibid.* The following section on Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev is drawn from research for this book. Their work was commissioned by the Art Institute of Chicago and also shown at Winkelman Gallery in New York, 13 November, 2008–10 January, 2009

¹⁴ China's daily consumption of oil rose from 4.2 million barrels in 1998 to 13.5 million barrels in 2018

¹⁵ With oil reserves estimated at 40 billion barrels and natural gas reserves in excess of 500 trillion cubic feet (with Turkmenistan accounting for 350 trillion cubic feet), the Central Asian Republics helped China reduce its dependence on West Asia for its energy needs. Beijing funded the construction of a pipeline system across Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan that helped supply China's energy needs. Central Asia is also richly endowed with uranium deposits with Kazakhstan holding the world's second largest reserves, after Australia. In recent years Kazakhstan has emerged as the largest producer of uranium, while Uzbekistan has significant deposits

¹⁶ East Turkistan, christened by the Chinese as Xinjiang (New Territory) was annexed with the help of the Soviet Union in 1949 when the People's Republic of China was established. Up until then it had been an autonomous region

¹⁷ In 2015, the young Chinese artist Zhao Yao first exhibited his ongoing project *The Spirit Above All That Celebrated Tibet*. Spanning 10,000 square metres and assembled from coloured cloth, more than 100 villagers carried and unfolded it, out in the sun on a snowy mountainside in Nangqian, Qinghai province on the Tibetan plateau. It was installed for six months alongside existing Buddhist sutra streamers, a white pagoda and murals. It was later shipped back to Beijing, where it was ceremonially installed on the field in Beijing's Workers' Stadium from sunrise to sunset on 18th May, 2018. This was followed by a later version of the work *Something in the Air* (2019), an inflatable model of the Marnyi stone, a stone engraved by a local artisan with the mantra or the Buddha in general. "Marnyi" is the abbreviation of "ommani padme hum", the six-syllabled Sanskrit mantra

¹⁸ Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman endorsed China's "anti-terrorism and de-extremization work for its national security." See Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads: The Present and Future of the World*, p. 213

¹⁹ The following remarks on Zhao Zhao owe much to the curatorial exhibitions and published essays of Cui Cancan and my own research for an exhibition of his work, *Repetition as Art: Zhao Zhao takes Action*, Hong Kong: Osage Foundation, 2018