

**DISLOCATING ASIA FROM SPACE & TIME:
ASIAN AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS IN TRANSIT¹**

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Orientation

The so called Asian Australian artists I discuss have forged expanding connections across space and time consequently their artwork resists being contained, identified or codified. They are divorced from notions of home and national contexts and are important to considerations of contemporary art informed by globalisation. Guan Wei, Ah Xian, and My Le Thi disrupt fixed notions of Asian and Australian identity as they occupy multiple contexts, and thereby pose particular challenges to essentialist notions of art and culture based on geography or history. The intersections of various traditions and conventions that have informed their art practice give a clear sense that notions of fixed identity, nationality or ethnicity must be rejected and changed.

The processes of globalisation have accelerated the redistribution of core and periphery where the old political, economic, and cultural barriers between the west, east, north and south are dissolving – in all directions (Hou, 2002). The map of Asia, delineated by colonial cartography as stretching

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from the Arctic to the Equator and from the Mediterranean Sea to the Pacific Ocean, is a vast imagined construction whose circumference is everywhere and centre nowhere (Wilson & Dirlik, 1995). “Asia” is a ‘suitcase’ concept into which many radically different types of society and culture are crammed. Asia is not unified being made up of many voices from diverse backgrounds, customs, artistic traditions, beliefs and practices. Moreover, an Asian ‘subject’ can be positioned as decentred from a specific country.

With the transfer of cultural (re)production and consumption across geographical spaces, due to travel and technology, diverse forms of art have become visible. Artists in Bangkok, Beijing or Brisbane can shift easily - culturally, physically or electronically - between countries across the globe:

[T]he world of visual culture has many dynamic locations, many possible vantage points. The emphasis in ‘polycentrism’ is not in spatial or primary points of origins or on a finite list of centres but rather on a systematic principle of differentiation, relationality, and linkage (Shohat & Stam, 2002, p. 56).

Many interconnected global and local networks make diverse artistic experiences concurrent and relational. Art and culture from different places can be accessed where the local is open to the global and vice versa, via a multidirectional movement with intersecting convergent and divergent trajectories.

In a liminal space mediated by various transnational art practices, contemporary art occupies a global space that can be divorced from notions of country and national contexts. There is “a dramatic and simultaneous process of both deterritorialization, as well as territorialization where received notions of order, based on historical and associations of citizenship, borders, time, and history, are being actively reworked” (Sundaram, 2003, p. 292). Indeed, it is this cultural bridging and slippage that makes contemporary art informed by globalisation both exciting and challenging. The idea of the contemporary should no longer be categorized within formalist or modernist categories for understanding its production and reception. Furthermore, the context of art can no longer be defined as if the world was neatly divided into exclusive geographic or cultural zones (Papastergiadis, 2001, cited in Smith, 2002, p. 123).

Identity - Based Exhibitions

From the 1990s large multinational exhibitions started to appear in the Asia Australia region (e.g., Brisbane, Fukuoka, Gwangju, Osaka, Shanghai, Sydney, Taipei, and Yokohama) located outside the Euro-American axis of power in the art world. These exhibitions highlighted the transcultural nature of art practice in which the issue of nationality became less straightforward. Indeed, “Crossing Borders” was a welcome and new category at the third *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* in Brisbane. Artists included in this section addressed “the concepts of history, time and connections in art practices across time, space and place” (Turner, 1999, p. 188). Artists from all over the world were represented in this section to reflect “the globally mobile context of today’s art” (Turner, 1999, p. 188). Guan Wei was the first Asian artist, to be included in the Australian section. Instead of saying that Guan Wei was Chinese, Asian or Asian Australian, it became convenient to categorise him as Australian. Interestingly, another so-called Asian Australian artist, Ah Xian, was included in the “Crossing Borders” section rather than the ‘Australian’ section: “The confusion of national or regional cultural identities was highlighted [in the APT3]” (Holder and Moore, 2000, p. 522).

Despite their inclusion in identity-based exhibitions, many artists have challenged their identification as Asian in “ethnically or regionally focussed exhibitions, biennales and magazines” (Burke, 2004, p. 2). This challenge has been taken up by Paris-based Chinese curator Hou Hanru, through his wide-ranging global curatorial activities. Hou is a good example of someone who has put the work of many countries on display together using comparative contexts and themes in order to reconfigure discourses of art away from nationality and hegemonic colonialist terms. As Vergne (2003) writes: “This subversion is a state of permanent alert that proposes the arts as a site for infinite experimentation, the location of a quiet resistance . . . against all attempts to codify and systemize the world” (p. 27). Multinational biennial exhibitions, such as those of Istanbul, Sao Paulo, Johannesburg, Sydney and Seoul no longer group work by nationality as many artists today are on the move and without a fixed address.

Journeys and Maps

It is increasingly evident that contemporary migration has no single origin and no simple end. It is an ongoing process and needs to be seen as an open voyage. Departures and returns are rarely, if ever, final, and so it is important that we acknowledge the transformative effect of the journey, and in general recognise that space is a dynamic field in which identities are in a constant state of interaction (Papastergiadis, 2001, p. 3). Guan Wei first journeyed to Australia from China in 1998. His artwork elucidates many insights into the diasporic experience and illustrates some of the changes that migrant artists negotiate in the rupture from a homeland. Notions of Asia are present yet thoroughly displaced in his work that points to a vague and undetermined identity or origin which cannot be neatly categorized or mapped.

However, the metaphor of the map can be a useful way to highlight different strategies which seek to “reorganize space by dislocating it from territory, and posit new forms of identity” (Sundaram, 2003, p. 293). Guan Wei has taken to painting expanded works, made up of small canvases that are placed together as segments of a larger grid to form one huge map. His artwork is inscribed with layered traces of diverse moments, containing within in it multiple temporalities as a means of representing global spaces and times. He does not limit his cartography to representations of the earth’s surface; his maps indulge in languorous sojourns, creating an itinerary that may or may not be helpful to those seeking the most direct route. In the installation *Feng Shui* (1999), Guan takes into account the natural energy forces that exist globally, as well as man-made conditions. He mixes signs and symbols from a variety of sources that are not resolvable to a single code and point to multiple worlds. Chinese symbols are juxtaposed with mapping conventions with lines of longitude and latitude that make the work familiar, allowing a ‘possible itinerary’ to be charted. The geography is divided in terms of grids and natural barriers of land and water, however, there are no borders on Guan’s map. He traces an accumulation of paths through space and time reflective of the diasporic condition.

Geography and cartography "appear" as an appropriate means of exploring the networks and boundaries of global relations. However, Guan’s cognitive maps might be better described as a melding of history and geography as they are discursive and open. From a variety of disparate imagery, he creates a typography that remaps “the past in order to facilitate the theoretical and phenomenological understanding of the multiple viewpoints of diaspora” (Mirzoeff, 2002, p. 209).

In the painting *Unfamiliar Land* (2006), Guan creates a multi-dimensional space and time, in which a variety of cultural and historical images blend and clash. This raises the question of whether his artwork is western incorporating eastern codes, or eastern incorporating western codes? The answer here is that it is both, while at the same time being something else. Guan produces unstable artworks so that they can be linked to ‘any-space-whatsoever’. He uses symbols that are both familiar and strange to audiences that resists notions of difference because it is at once half-strange and partially familiar. Guan’s identity is not fixed but moves between cultures, whilst transforming and being transformed through this transience.

Transience

As more and more people travel for education or work the reference point of ‘home’ is dissolved. Home can now be many places. Thus the relation between geography (place) and home is being challenged. Moreover, place is no longer a fixed point of dwelling but moves along a constantly shifting and reorienting trajectory. This point not only raises questions about home but also destination. The transient experience oscillates between cultures and between home and destination causing a vague and undetermined identity or origin. Travel and migration are “advancing the dissolution of fixed attitudes towards geographical and racial difference” (Allen, 2001, p. 106). The contemporary landscape is made up of displaced and dispersed peoples that travel between homes. For these people, who inhabit an in-between space straddling disparate cultures and societies, the effects of this movement makes home less static and ever more volatile:

[I]t is increasingly evident that contemporary migration has no single origin and no simple end. It is an ongoing process and needs to be seen as an open voyage. Departures and returns are rarely, if ever, final, and so it is important that we acknowledge the transformative effect of the journey, and in general recognise that space is a dynamic field in which identities are in a constant state of interaction (Papastergiadis, 2001, p. 3).

Transience is embedded in the dispersed art networks that emancipate artistic practice from a time and place and hence any connection to a ‘home’ is attenuated. My vision of contemporary art informed by globalisation is inflected by different types and pressures of cultural contact, by different patterns of travel, by different matrixes of the vernacular and the migrant, and by transient artists. The notion of transience is a condition of the globalised world where diasporic artists are

very much unfixed. Constantly travelling between metropolitan centres and different continents, a new breed of cosmopolitan artists conduct their lives in numerous places. For these displaced and dispersed artists, who inhabit an in-between space straddling disparate cultures and societies, the effects of global mobility make identification and categorisation problematic.

In fact, the significance of contemporary art informed by globalisation is not necessarily the cultural location of artists but their ability to move between different locales (Foster, 1994). Ah Xian, for example, lives and works between Sydney and Beijing and by doing so he is released from the immediate pressures of space and time. His physical distance from Chinese society and cultural distance from Australian society has created an in-between space that has influenced the development of his art. In his sculpture series *Human Human* (2000 - current) and *China China* (1998 - current), Xian uses history as a means of connection to the present – between there and here, then and now. Xian connects his Chinese background with a western artistic language in these works. Trying to capture the ancient culture of China, as somehow authentic, albeit in a transformed state, is partly a way for Xian to come to terms with his identity as a Chinese artist in Australia (Jaivan, 2002, p. 29).

However, Xian's work is neither Chinese, nor Australian. His artwork is physically related to China because it is made using Chinese artisans and techniques but is far from Chinese with its forms, colours and patterning (Jin Hua, cited in Yang Yingshi, 2000, p. 3). Xian's art is a reworking of Chinese culture that is overwhelmed by a western influence and in its western context there is an excess of Chineseness. Consequently, Xian's art belongs to both and neither places. He has stridently asserted his cultural distinctiveness by moving to Australia and trying paradoxically to move to and from China. Hou (2002, p. 65) refers to the choice "to leave home as a new way of living" brought about through globalisation:

I have thought a lot about the tensions in the relationship between living in Australia and working in China, and the relationship between Australia and the rest of the world . . . I believe this position that I'm in is something quite beneficial to me. . . . I now feel I'm in an excellent position from which I can work. I particularly like my ability to move from place to place. . . . Knowing I'll be moving elsewhere keeps me fresh (Xian cited in Devenport & Jaivan, 2003, p. 21).

The transient experience oscillates between cultures and between home and destination in a “shuttling” effect in a continuous process of crossing back and forth (Papastergiadis, 2005, p. 289). Xian’s artwork highlights his dislocated state in which cultural crossing confers certain insights and creative moments, as well as resisting any coherence of culture.

As before-mentioned transience is encoded in the itinerancy of artists that charts nomadic paths and geographic lines between the global and local which have little to do with national borders (Papastergiadis, 2001). Transient artists move beyond their immediate locale and consequently transfer ideas between one place and the next. It is in transient activities that contemporary artists can imagine and project in their practice a deconstruction of the validity of “centre and periphery and where spaces of ‘in-between’ or ‘beyond’, the world of ‘out of centre’ can be given life” (Hou, 2002, p. 48). Contemporary artists, informed by globalisation, circulate between positions occupying mobile locations. Such artists move from locale to locale inserting some Otherness each time renewing and reclaiming borders through travel because their artwork provides transition points between multiple centres. New cultural spaces are being “crisscrossed by a fluidity of national/regional/global cultural styles” all mediated by the artist (Sundaram, 2003, p. 298). Many contemporary artists informed by globalisation make powerful statements about culture and art on the move. Their “creativity moves from one space to another and the creative act is that movement” (Hall & Maharaj, 2003, p. 278). In other words, Guan Wei and Ah Xian’s work is based on the process of mobility and differentiation, a differentiation that is not fixed but in motion. Thus, as part of globalisation, these artists tend to act and negotiate across cultures.

It can be seen that Asia is not simple, fixed, or necessarily authentic. A focus on where artists come from and where they currently reside denies a broader shift within contemporary art practice, that is, as artists travel the notion of home and origin dissolves. Some diasporic artists have consciously accentuated the possibility and desirability of a return to home in their work. They may or may not realise the difficulty of this gesture. In fact their work communicates “the effects of spatial-temporal dislocation and renders the issue of origin problematic” (Gilroy, 2000, p. 129). The different forms of travel Guan Wei and Ah Xian have taken, either visceral or physical, suggest the possibility of dislocating Asia. The diasporic identity has been commonly understood as determined by the home that has been left and the new adopted home. However, the location of home and Otherness has become indeterminate - determined in a perpetually deferred way.

Mixed Identity

Many contemporary artists with mixed identities create art that illustrates the difficulty of locating artists into a single place. For example, when My Le Thi arrived in Australia from Vietnam in the 1980s, she developed a unique fusion of artistic styles in her paintings and installations that combine Chinese and Vietnamese influences with European and Australian influences. Thi (2000) states:

I was born and brought up . . . in the Highlands of South Vietnam. My parents were both Chinese immigrants to Vietnam. During my childhood I experienced Western, Ede, Chinese and Vietnamese cultures I combine a Western influence with the influence of Australia's Northern Territory Aborigine, Ede, Vietnamese and Chinese in my paintings and installations (p. 58).

Thi makes an important point here about her mixed identity and inspiration, as her artworks cannot be reduced into any single context. This itinerary of multiple and mixed cultures is not merely an exotic biography, but indicates the contradictions and complexities of identity. Thi is not bounded by one culture or identity and therefore: "problemetizes the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging . . . by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness" (Gilroy, 2000, p. 123). Indeed, her self-conscious display of mixed ethnicity and border crossing serves to disrupt notions of 'origin' and 'authenticity' because she is both inside and outside multiple communities and areas.

Thi moves across and mixes a variety of media including - painting, sculpture, found objects, performance, sound, music and video - exploring the areas of convergence and collision between them. Her art practice is fluid and allows multi-directional movement. In the *Our Shoes Project* (1993 - 2004), Thi uses different techniques to explore the multifaceted migrant experience of belonging. Her artwork is formed out of the physics of diasporic dispersion - part real, part imaginary, part fixed and part in flow (Papastergiadis, 2001). The *Our Shoes Project*, as a work-in-progress, resulted in various configured and re-configured combinations of objects being exhibited that reflect the flux of being according to space and time. The installations were an eclectic mix consisting of different well-worn shoes, embellished shoes and plaster cast feet collected over

several years. These everyday objects from everyday experiences are all heading in different directions and places to reflect diverse life journeys from place to place. Thi emphasises the effects of migrants on transforming identity: “Their collective journeys of migration and resettling are no longer episodes in the lives of minority groups rather they are common contemporary . . . experiences” (Lee-Shoy, 1999, p. 2).

Thi’s intensely autobiographical artwork poignantly captures a sense of multiple (be)longings, on being a stranger “among others” and “in between others”, and the impossibility of a return to an originary homeland (Thi, 2000, p. 59). When a home is left some things are recalled and some forgotten or translated through spatio-temporal change. In fact at the end of 2006, she went back to Vietnam through an Asialink Residence Program to remember back and learn more about her heritage. Thi has developed her own strategy using habit and ritual to scrutinise her history and multiple homes. This process is especially evident in Thi’s installation *9 Encounters* (1999) as she recombines past moments in new contexts that invoke a disjointed history and memory of home. However, the memory of home is just that - a memory of something that no longer exists.

Moreover, in *9 Encounters*(1999), Thi emphasises the inadequacy of a framing context based on ethnicity, "with its demand for the essentialisation of identities and preoccupation with the maintenance of community and homeland ties" (Carruthers, 2000, p. 46). In the work, she expresses an intuitive feeling of mystery and movement by compounding invented iconography and fetish objects. Thi (2000, p. 58) uses “texts in Chinese, Vietnamese and English to create imagery in the work” that addresses the meaning or meaninglessness of language and cultural difference. *9 Encounters* is a montage or palimpsest incorporating a multiplicity of signs and symbols from different contexts, each embodying a series of contrary or competing associations that is not quite illegible or incomprehensible but extends the meaning beyond any Asian or Australian origin. As a result there is no dominant or uniform ethnicity reflected in her art practice. Thi’s artwork articulates glimpses of her competing cultural history from China, Vietnam and Australia, manifesting the multiplicity of her global perspective, while also challenging assumptions of cultural determinacy and assimilability.

Indeterminacy and de-identification

Images created by many diasporic artists throw up the issues of de-identity and indeterminacy. Guan Wei, Ah Xian and My Le Thi illustrate the temporal and experiential rift between the locations of home and the locations of belonging. These artists have fluid identities emerging from the ‘unhomely’ spaces they occupy. Their identity is highly multifaceted, continually shifting, and challenging to all kinds of established definitions and boundaries. This is what Hou (2002a, p. 119) calls a “de-identity” going through the process of general deterritorialisation. These artists are in Bhabha’s (1994, pp. 9-18) terms the “unhomely” inhabitants of the globalising world in a process of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. What makes these artists so interesting is because they cannot be slotted into neat geographical or historical categories. The status of diasporic artists with mixed identities has become blurred. As a result, the artists have a flexibility of identity that is multiple and shifting. Hou (2002a) believes that what is particularly crucial about diasporic artists is that

they all aim to propose and insist on cultural differences as representing a resistance to the totality of the ‘culture of the nation-state’ through various forms of thought and creation. . . . The end result of this process is that they de-identify the established identity (p. 108).

The artists I have mentioned are a part of the art world (they do not operate outside of the system), however their work exists in an in-between space that resists assimilation and homogenisation. This proposition suggests a transitory understanding of their art practice that is both inside and outside mainstream society – in this case Australia – their works rupture notions of Asia. Wei, Xian and Thi share an uneasiness or slippage of identity as being both Asian and Australian paradoxically belonging to both and neither. As a result, these artists have a flexibility of identity that is multiple and shifting.

The deterritorialisation of art links diverse audiences with text and traditions from a variety of sources so that it can be linked to ‘any-space-whatsoever’. Indeterminate cultural identity has encouraged diasporic artists to go beyond unification and assimilation to recover: “the genealogy of the mixed times and spaces” (Mirzoeff, 2002, pp. 162). Asian diasporic artists produce work that provides an open terrain for consideration, that is the aesthetics of space and time, where the boundaries of art are continually shifting and expanding beyond western modernism. This can be

productive for contemporary art “By inventing and creating the new space of contestation and new ‘ethnoscape’ in the Western societies they give birth to a veritable global art” (Hou, 2002, p. 82).

Out of Space and Time

Guan Wei, Ah Xian and My Le Thi provide opportunities to map convergence and realignments that break with the traditional historical connections with Europe and America because they are informed by discourses from around the world. These artists insert certain amounts of “Asian history and culture” into their work as a means of representing an alternative way of thinking that disrupts the hegemony of Western art history and transgresses modernist visual and textual codes. They juxtapose images and styles from different historical periods and contexts that implies the impossibility of a linear historical narrative. The traditional concern of art history for chronological developments in particular sites is now challenged by an uncertainty of time and place. By attenuating their links with certain contexts, these artists create artworks that can be attributed to a multiple places and times; existing across and in-between times and sites, enjoying a certain mobility of meaning. They consciously promote or suggest a displaced field of references that cannot be fixed or reduced to a master narrative or code. In this respect their artworks enable associations and references to many historical and cultural sites whilst resisting assimilation into any particular one. Wei, Xian and Thi’s art is: “a parody of art’s history (radically eclectic, radically plural and, in a sense, style-less)” and it is “a post-historical art (detached from the historical narratives of art)” (Colless, 2002, p. 89).

A major aspect of the artwork discussed is that it cannot necessarily be located in “Asia” or categorised as “Asian”. The artists freely quote from a number of cultures and histories to resist assimilation. They use a variety of texts and means to create polycentric artworks of heterogeneous invention making strange combinations of languages and styles. The familiar, the foreign, the strange, and the common stand as anomaly in their art works to create pictures of indeterminate origin and thus a truly global identity. In fact Wei, Xian and Thi use a variety of ‘traditions’ to recreate, reinvent, and realise a global language that dislocates the viewer by disrupting notions of time and space. Their art provides opportunities to map convergence and realignments that are contributing to the transformation of contemporary art through globalisation.

Endnote

Although this paper cannot be taken as representative of all art produced by so called Asian Australian artists, it nonetheless suggests some ways of thinking critically about contemporary art informed by globalisation. Guan Wei, Ah Xian and My Le Thi's work provide a chronometer to navigate the trajectories of a new global landscape of art. Their artistic practice reflects the changing contexts of art in an inescapably connected world with no stable point of reference. There are only limited possibilities in trying to read Wei, Xian and Thi's artwork in ethnographic or geographical terms – they cannot be slotted into a set category of origin or belonging. They incorporate a variety of histories and times in their artwork that challenges a linear temporality. In different ways, these artists explore ideas of globalisation in their work characterised by transience and fluidity, unassimilability and 'strangeness', transgression and disjunction.

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