

DOUG HALL

THE FIRST

ASIA-PACIFIC **OF CONTEMPORARY ART** **TRIENNIAL**

BRISBANE AUSTRALIA 1993

QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY

The First Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, 1993

This paper is somewhat a case of looking out from the inside, and vice versa. The circumstances of how and why the first Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) were conceived, developed and happened will be a professional and personal version. The critical reaction to it and the Triennials which followed are well covered and are on the public record. Most historical accounts of the APT are accurate. There have been some strange observations which are simply incorrect. Critical reaction was varied, usually generous, and embracing a variety of perspectives depending on peoples' cultural circumstances and intellectual perspectives. I'm mindful that many who visited the later Triennials were young, perhaps not born at the time of the first in 1993.

It is an account that is not simply about a cultural project: that is, an idea and its realization. It is not possible to consider the APT without understanding the historical and unique circumstances of the gallery which created it. It is not a mirror of any other history you might find with the National Gallery of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of New South Wales or the Art Gallery of South Australia. The Queensland Art Gallery – no Gallery of Modern Art at the time – didn't secure a permanent home until 1982 in the new Robin Gibson designed Queensland Cultural Centre. The Gallery was established in 1895 and spent much of the twentieth century as a cultural squatter, which included being a tenant in the Mount Isa Mines Building in central Brisbane.

It is a story interwoven with politics and rejuvenation. It is important to discuss this because nothing like it happened elsewhere. And it is not vainglory, but a decidedly embarrassing description of a peculiar and localized history, where nothing sat mutually exclusive from anything else. I have chosen to not presuppose too much detailed pre-existing knowledge. Some of what I offer is fresh and untold. And as an aside, APT1 in 1993 was undertaken in a pre-digital age. Typing on paper recorded things and rolls of film created the visual record. In a few places in Asia, faxes were received at supporting community and business places which had little to do with the arts.

It is important to know something of the Queensland Art Gallery at the time and the broader cultural, political and geo-political circumstances to give a clear picture of why the APT seemed like a good idea at the time. But one thing needs to be made clear at the outset: the APT was a concept born out of the Gallery's own situation. Various interests supported it, after they were inducted into what we wanted to do. It was not an inspired program of state cultural diplomacy, even though politicians on all sides were happy to promote it as such.

The artwork *detail A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/someone looks at something... Qld: 1979 PUPPET CULTURE FRAMING SYSTEM* (1979) is by one of Australia's finest and consistent artists from the 1970s, Peter Tyndall. I think it is more immediately understood than some of his work when it is placed in its particular context. It was painted in 1979 and has an intriguing provenance. What eventually happened to the painting itself is, paradoxically, contained within what the painting represents. It speaks of something, yet anticipates something else. In 1977, Peter Tyndall won the Gallery's L. J. Harvey Drawing Prize and in 1979 he was invited to enter The Trustees Prize of that year. This work was submitted and rejected. Tyndall sent a letter of protest about the decision to the director alleging political intimidation. He received a letter in return saying there was insufficient space for all the works. Surely an overreaction—perhaps a case of reciprocal paranoia? Not quite. It dates to the peak of a decade when street marches were banned and where protesters were arrested or belted, or both.

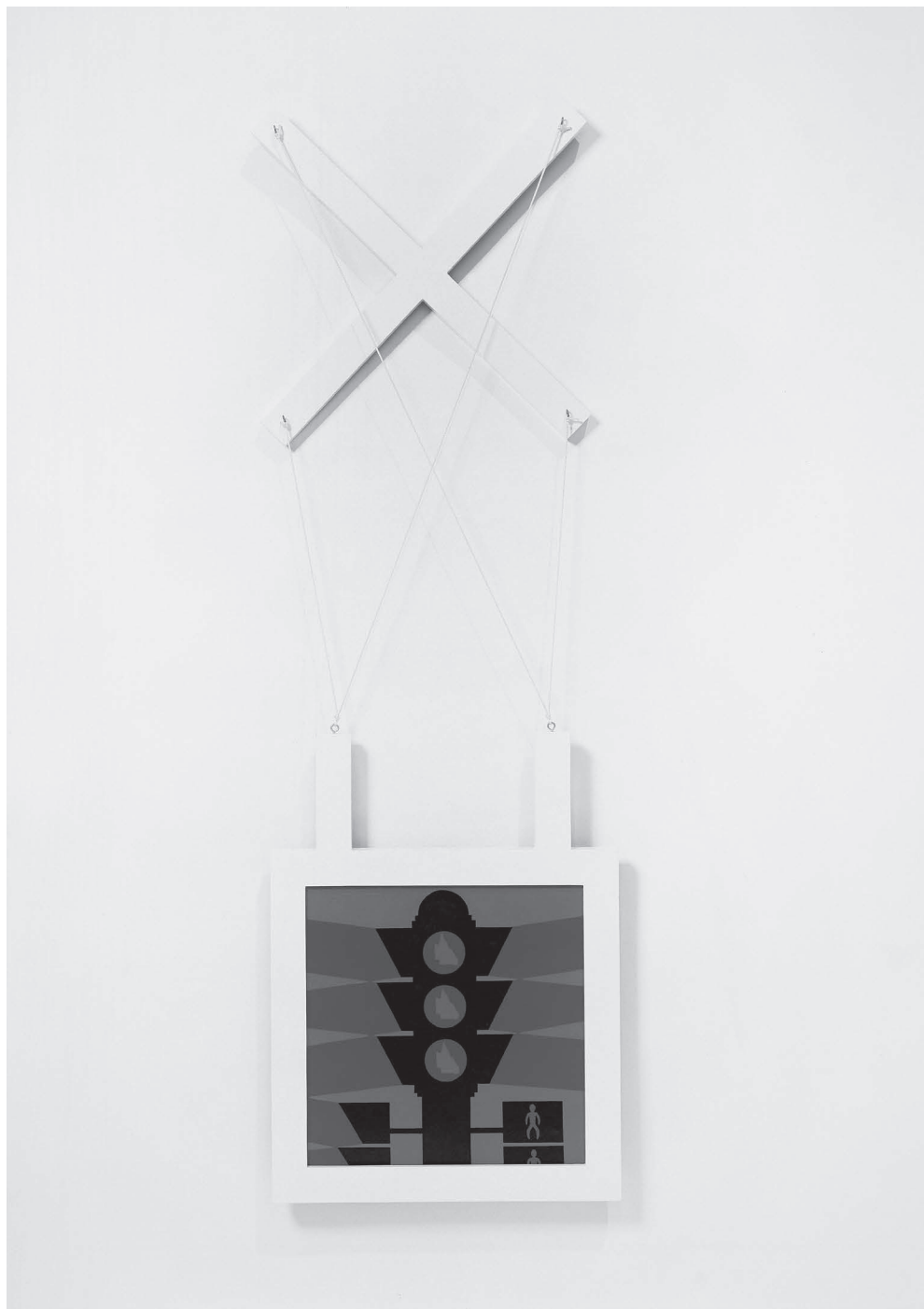
Much of Queensland's political behaviour was decidedly idiosyncratic. There are a few cameo moments that ought to be recalled. While they might appear somewhat satirical, they nonetheless serve as emblematic vignettes of much broader conduct and encapsulate fuller accounts of thinking and attitudes, and subsequent changes. They will also reveal that those with a view of politics as a game of winner takes all, and that includes making the public service—especially the police—inseparable from sectarian political ambition. Since the late 1950s in Queensland, electoral gerrymanders were entrenched.¹ The arts were not remote from ideological politics.

I had never been to Brisbane until I went for an interview in the second half of 1986. This was the time when Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen's National Party remained in conflict with their coalition Liberals. The Nationals and Liberals despised each other and certainly more than their instinctive nemesis, the Labor Party. Distracted from governing became the norm. In late 1986 I had to fly to Brisbane and meet Brian Austin who was Minister for Mines, Energy and the Arts. He was required to take the recommendation of my appointment to cabinet. I wasn't allowed to be seen in Brisbane. I was picked up at the airport and put in a hotel. I was collected the following morning and taken to the Minister's office a few blocks away. He burst into the room, shook my hand, apologized for being late and, distracted, said he had a cabinet meeting in an hour, adding, "I've got condoms on the brain." Fortunately, I'd read the local paper. Many in cabinet were determined to roll the premier and allow condom vending machines to be installed at the University of Queensland. The premier lost. That was unheard of. It signalled that his usually capitulating cabinet had reached the end of its collective tether. I saw the minister for ten minutes and went to the airport.

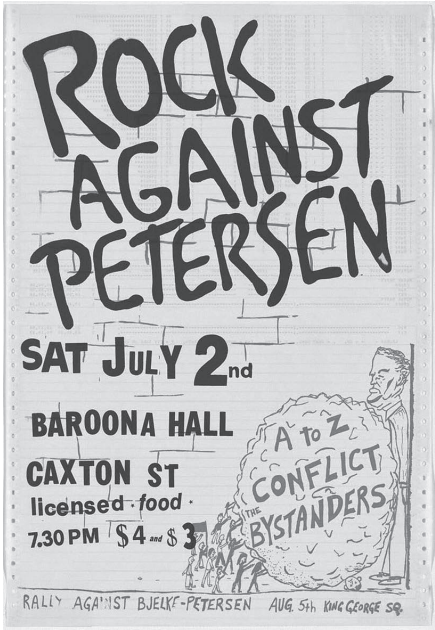
In 1987 I arrived in Brisbane within a week or so after April Fool's Day. I had various briefings piled on my desk. Among them was a note concerning a visit a recent minister had made to the Gallery in 1986. Peter McKechnie was a lay preacher and farmer. He arrived at the Gallery with his political advisor and paced the length of the Gallery's walls, and notes were taken. He quickly formed a view of the lineal hanging space that was given to art that was unacceptable—mainly contemporary art. Seemingly the die had been long-cast, that the political winner takes all—albeit with 26% of the vote—knew no bounds.

On New Year's Day 1987, Premier Bjelke-Petersen announced he was going to Canberra, that he would be prime minister. Amongst a mishmash of policy gibberish was a 25% flat tax and the withdrawal of Aboriginal Land Rights. The campaign morphed from "Joh for PM" to "Joh for Canberra." On 11 May 1987, ABC TV screened the Four Corners program, 'The Moonlight State.'

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The premier was in the United States. Within a day or so Acting Premier, Bill Gunn ordered a commission of inquiry. Bjelke-Petersen was in Disneyland at the time it was announced. Ian Callinan QC, drafted the terms of reference. Callinan was also a Trustee of the Gallery. On 27 May, the premier was still in the US when Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke called a double dissolution of parliament. That sank Bjelke-Petersen's delusional aspiration. He didn't have a seat to stand in.

The subsequent Fitzgerald Inquiry (into police corruption) would be set in place. It seems unnecessary to restate the chronology of what happened. Suffice to say, the premier behaved more erratically and had no control over something the government had commissioned. The second half of 1987 was a mad house. He tried to sack a group of ministers, and the Governor of Queensland wouldn't agree. On 27 November the parliamentary party shafted Bjelke-Petersen 39-9 and for days afterwards he still claimed he was premier. Mike Ahern was now premier and Minister for the Arts. There was a sense of relief and it permeated throughout government and the public service. There had been a palpable sense of being watched by ideological eyes. And in many cases that was true. My curator of Australian Art had once been taken out for a drink by members of the Special Branch. It was to check on his ideological soundness.

None of the mayhem bothered me. I was left unencumbered by any political imperative and given a long leash to implement change and rethink the Gallery. But some things were tricky —prospective Gallery sponsors were cautious. While wanting to support the Gallery, they were uncertain about such support being seen as offering a default approval of government. Like everyone else, they wanted an election. Former minister Austin was later to be jailed as a result of charges laid in the wake of the Fitzgerald Inquiry. I provided testimony which was somewhat unhelpful in explaining some of the twenty-five counts of misappropriating public funds. He went to jail for fifteen months.

World Expo 88 preoccupied Brisbane for half the year. The Queensland Cultural Centre, which included the Gallery, was next to it. Many will be familiar with its architecture. It's one of Australia's finest works of concrete minimalism built by Australia's most reactionary government. The Queensland Art Gallery building is important for its considerations of how a contemporary art museum might function. It was certainly the first in Australia to recognize that the phenomenon of 'the blockbuster' and that intense exhibition programming wasn't going away. It was a fabulous building to work with—its logic and clarity of expression is pristine. Its large temporary exhibition space was in the centre of the building and built for purpose.

The blockbuster exhibition was well and truly ensconced as part of civic self-esteem—from the Crystal Palace exhibition of 1851 and all those international exhibitions which followed. The phenomenon of the blockbuster as being critical to art museum conduct has raged for the past forty years. Exhibition programming has influenced changes in art museum architecture more than most other aspects of their conduct. The huge rise globally of biennials and triennials is something of an echo of the colonial idea of acting locally and embracing the world. When the Gallery opened in 1982 it was said to be Brisbane's coming of age. In fact, most things that happened in Brisbane were a coming of age. What does this mean? What does it say about civic self-doubt, or parochial self-importance? The Commonwealth Games in 1982, a new airport in 1988, Expo and, more recently, a Ferris wheel—a heritage modernist experience from 1893, Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition—are markers of coming of age. Very odd. Until 1982 the Gallery never had a permanent home. I had the opportunity to rethink almost everything about what its future might be. And staff were exuberant with the opportunity.

Australian state galleries are creations of the nineteenth century, and Queensland's is one of the youngest. It collected in the traditional areas of Australian, British and European art, but it could never compare itself with the expansive, sometimes encyclopaedic character of its sister institutions, especially the AGNSW and the NGV. There were subtle and interesting distinctions to the Queensland Art Gallery's collections. Nonetheless, the Australian collection was of lesser interest to the collections in the country towns of Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong.

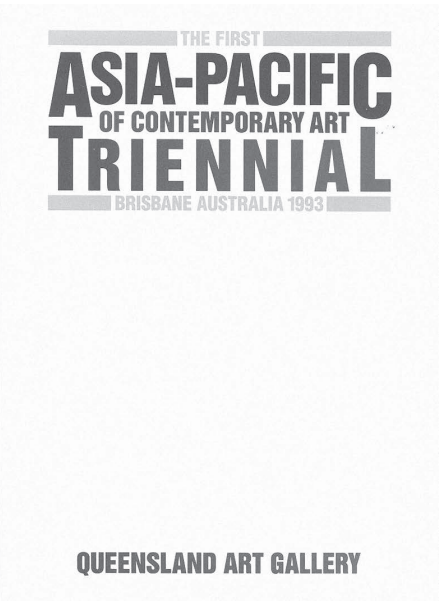
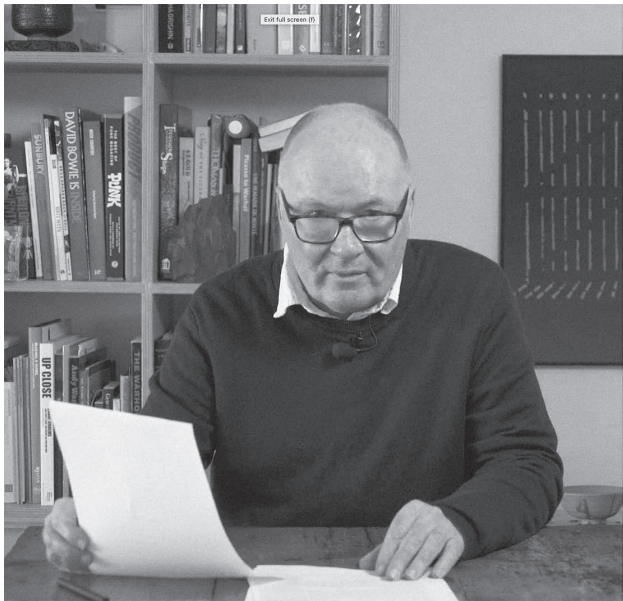
Government and private support were comparatively strong. But if the Gallery wanted to play catch-up and try to become a mirror of its sister institutions, it would diminish its reputation. Major artists were represented with minor works, and quite a few like Eugene von Guerard² were not represented at all. There were no epic Heidelberg School narrative works.³ If there were to be an historical regional emphasis, what might it look like? I posed the question, "Name the ten finest nineteenth century Queensland painters." I couldn't find anyone who could name ten, let alone the finest. Lesser known artists were collected because a state gallery must also be local. And acquiring contemporary Aboriginal art happened relatively late in time. Any prospect of becoming a timid version of other state galleries made no sense. Masterpieces were rare. We couldn't collect in depth and tell a coherent story, and we would pay exorbitant sums to collect lesser works by major artists.

The best-known aspects of the Gallery's Asian collections were Edo *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, a collection of netsuke and objects from various places but without a coherent thread, the familiar museum predicament of occasional purchases and private bequests. But it continued to put together a very fine vignette of Asian collections. These included extending the *ukiyo-e* print collection and purchasing masterpieces from the Six Old Kilns of Japan — Shigaraki, Tamba, Echizen, Seto, Bizen and Tokoname. These connected nicely with a good collection of Australian pottery from the 1950s and 1960s. In other words, the Gallery began to collect disparately but more tightly focused than it had in the past. Contemporary Asia would soon follow.

Queensland developed Sister State, or Prefecture relationships: Shanghai, and Saitama, an hour from Tokyo, were two important ones. Institutions tend to balk at the obligations expected with such arrangements. But they can work and work well. In late 1987 the Gallery co-curated a large exhibition of contemporary Australian art which was presented at the Museum of Modern Art, Saitama. In return, the Gallery presented *Japanese Ways, Western Means. Art of the 80s in Japan* in 1989 and purchased work from it for the permanent collection. Today it's an exhibition title which makes little sense, and that was probably the case then. An important exhibition of historical work was drawn from the Shanghai Museum. In return, a hugely well-received exhibition of contemporary Australian jewellery was presented in Shanghai. There was no logical historical connection the Gallery had with the arts of Asia. The idea of the Asia Pacific Triennial was a construct: just that, an idea. I'd become consumed with the observation that as the twentieth century marched on, Western museums collected less and less Asian art of its time.

In December 1989 the inevitable happened: a Wayne Goss government was elected. He took on the arts portfolio too. Many people think that marked the triumph of good over evil — well, that's largely true. The premier's Chief of Staff, Kevin Rudd,⁴ sent Bjelke-Petersen acolytes to what was colloquially known as the Spring Hill Gulag. Two thirds of public servant heads were isolated. After the demise of what (ex-PM) Gough Whitlam⁵ called the "Ancien Régime," a sense of new possibilities took hold. The APT, a major project, and the idea that something emerging from a small base and might fail, is not a common part of current museum nomenclature. Premier Goss' reaction was telling. He told me he took on the arts because political and administrative reform was certain.

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He wanted Queenslanders to think differently about themselves, and “that’s where the arts come in.” I worked closely with Goss — and later, post-politics, when he became my chairman. When I went to see him as premier in 1990 to ask for additional money for the first Asia Pacific Triennial, he thought it was a risk, but an acceptable risk, and gave me the ex gratia grant of \$600,000 I asked for. The concept of regional cultural diplomacy wasn’t lost on him either.

What marked the Asia Pacific Triennial as different from the proliferation of other biennials and triennials over the past three decades is that it is institutionally based, becoming inseparable from the conduct of a well-established art museum. It was not conceived as a project of gratuitous cultural-dollar-grandeur (as some blockbusters have been, and I can plead guilty to that), nor as an effort at soft diplomacy. In fact, we weren’t sure what we were in for, and we announced we’d do three and if they failed, we’d end them.

In Australian collections, Asian art was largely art history — the more Asia changed and became interested in ideas beyond their traditional cultures, there was a corresponding decreasing interest in what Asian artists produced, and they weren’t collected. Internationalism was seemingly the prerogative of the West. To deal with geo-cultural specifics a national consultative committee was established. It offered informed project guidance with no role as curatorial selectors. It included Gallery staff, a regional gallery director, David Williams, an art school head, Asialink’s Alison Carroll, Neil Manton from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and other occasional participants. One of its earlier meetings was in Kuala Lumpur. Thailand’s renowned curator, Apinan Poshyananda, attended along with our Malaysian colleagues. There was no uniform or rigid organizational model, it had to be flexible. Developing relationships and, eventually, pulling together the logistical arrangements was never going to be the same in Vietnam as it is in Korea.

Equally, it is important to observe that certain Western typecast ideas of what contemporary art might look like in Asia was going to mute expectations. Vietnam easily accommodated the high modernism of the School of Paris with culturally specific folk and colloquial figuration. Unlike the Venice Biennale, countries were not represented by artists. The APT represented the work of artists who lived in particular countries. Some post-Tiananmen Chinese artists didn’t live in China. The assistance and support of various government agencies was welcomed, but none had a role in selection. This was not always an easy undertaking. Well-established protocols of curatorial conduct expanded into a new model. Some staff across disciplines — all with art historical backgrounds — would perform curatorial roles, each with important curatorial contacts in particular countries. Some were informal, others were connected with institutions. It was relationship-based where local voices were heard, local cultural politics somewhat understood and where the APT didn’t brazenly invoke its Western dominated imprimatur. The Pacific required a different approach. Despite our wish to make everything happen in person, the vastness of geography and logistics meant that for the first APT, extensive curatorial travel and visits at the time were not possible. That would later change. But for 1993 our relationship with the Pacific was mediated through New Zealand and their well-established networks and deep understanding of cultural contexts. Queensland itself had a close-knit Pacific community.

The APT was speculative and not risk averse. We sought to engage people directly and had a substantial budget for curatorial travel to each of the participating countries so that unofficial and interdependent connections could be established. Above all we wanted to connect the ideas and the institution to people in a collegial sense. That was why we had a large budget for bringing artists, writers, curators and others to Brisbane, and took the risk of being a venue for ambitious projects

that artists wanted to undertake but had never had the opportunity to realize. It was also important to bring—at the Gallery's expense—as many artists as possible to Brisbane.

Its legacy endures within an art museum context, not as an event which lingers in one's memory or through ephemera and publications which underpin a particular cultural moment. The APT had a few early doubters who later became its strongest advocates, the records reveal wavering to eventual vigorous devotees. The purchases made from APT1 helped consolidate the dovetailing of a major project and the manner in which the Gallery would operate. It developed a distinctive cultural mindset which spread across every department. Works across all media were acquired by artists from every country. Trustees never rejected a curatorial proposal. It was a case of trustees and professional staff in cultural and institutional alignment. Dadang Christanto's *For those who have been killed* (1993) was an installation which included a performance component. The Gallery acquired it. It was also a participatory work for the public: private notes were made, left under a suspended bamboo arrangement and collected daily.

The APT came to represent the Gallery, not only as an event but also as an enduring commitment to our region. It also reveals that many professional and museological practices altered because of the APT. Changes happened from within and not always observing and taking the exemplar of others. APT2 expanded to fifteen curatorial teams and further extended artistic, intellectual and intuitional networks. While I'm keen to embrace curatorial unilateralism as a virtue, it is not possible to think about the APT being developed and respected without the intense collaboration of so much disparateness.

At the time the APT was viewed as an unclear venture as the Gallery sought to identify a unique international role without aping the activity of other state or national institutions. Governments of all persuasions embraced it and used it intelligently as a marker of cultural diplomacy of what the State of Queensland might represent. The scale of the APT was ambitious, but it didn't emerge from a vacuum. Australians, such as author and then cultural counsellor, Nicholas Jose, and art historian, Claire Roberts, were in Beijing in the late 1970s and 1980s, and were deeply engaged with the contemporary art scene. Their intellectual and practical advocacy for artists was hugely important. Roberts curated the important exhibition, *New Art from China: Post-Mao Pop*, which toured various Australian venues in 1992–93.

At an early stage the word spread about the APT's aspirations. I remember being in Tokyo in late 1989, four years before the first APT, and being told that a few Tiananmen self-exiled Chinese artists were in Tokyo and wanted to meet me. The Gallery's intentions were already being talked about. I was tracked down by Gu Wenda, Cai Guo Qiang, and others. In a sense, that's a marker of the Triennial's conduct. There was no convenient pre-existing network, and the informality of relationships that developed set a pattern of how things would be done. What emerged from this was a distinctive 'personality' which the Gallery enjoyed, especially the ease with which it undertook projects which were speculative. In later Triennials it was prepared to look retrospectively, to think about artists—Lee Ufan is an excellent example—who were well regarded but had remained distant from serious accounts of late twentieth century non-Asian art and deserved to be part of a fuller international story.

It's self-evident to note that the contemporary Asian art market took off and overheated. In the space of a decade the Gallery was in the hypothetical position of being unable to go out and buy the collection it already owned. In some cases the Queensland Art Gallery was the first major Western museum to exhibit or collect substantial work by artists such as Cai Guo Qiang, Xu Bing,

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Montien Boonma, Takashi Murakami, Lee Bul and Zhang Xiaogang. Artists were helpful in accommodating a public gallery's limited acquisitions budget. Yayoi Kusama is well represented including a major room installation, *Soul Under the Moon* (2002). Ai Weiwei was first collected before his near-cult celebrity status took hold. And now QAGOMA's research library is vast.

The APT was the product of a cultural policy imperative, an institutional realignment, and how the Gallery sought to avoid becoming a pale reflection of other Australian curatorial conduct. It never tried to match what other collections had brilliantly achieved, where it had no chance of emulating. Perhaps the most unanticipated characteristic of the APT is its broader public reception. A couple of decades earlier most people would have accepted the one-liner that the public doesn't respond to contemporary art. But what's fascinating is that new art, made by artists the broader public had never heard of, from cultures they often know little about, aroused considerable curiosity.

In 1996, Nicholas Serota, Director of the Tate Gallery, gave a lecture titled, 'Experience or Interpretation. The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art'. He spoke of the Pompidou Centre in Paris, which opened in 1977, that sought to establish a new model for the interaction of creative disciplines in the twentieth century—an open museum, a place where there is a natural contact between artists and the public in developing the most contemporary elements of creativity. He closed his essay with this final paragraph: "Our aim must be to generate a condition in which visitors can experience a sense of discovery in looking at particular paintings, sculptures or installations in a particular room at a particular moment, rather than finding themselves standing on the conveyor belt of history."

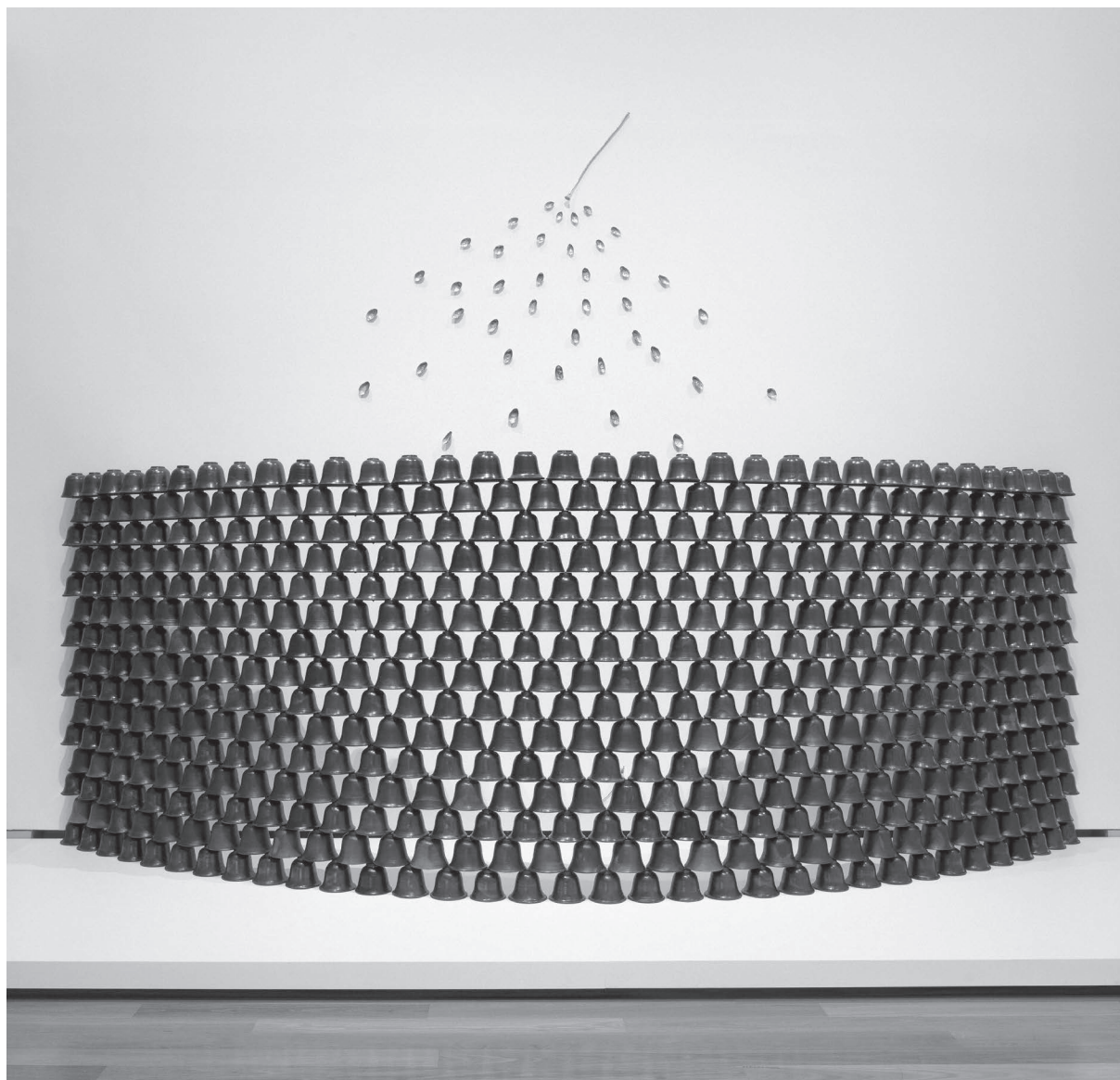
The first APT opened with close to two hundred works by seventy-six artists from Southeast Asia, East Asia and the South Pacific. And it grew exponentially from a beginning which drew interest not only locally and from the region, but also North America and Europe. Whatever expectations people might have had about historical Asian continuity were, on occasions, ruptured. Korea's Lee Bul's performance made an amusing and poignant point about cultural and gender constructs. The opening crowd knew nothing about the planned and unannounced performance. It was an ongoing sequence of clothes-swapping involving audience participation. At the end of the performance the artist was wearing none of her own clothes. Many in the audience had to find and negotiate the exchange of their own.

To invoke a cliché, the excitement and energy levels surrounding APT1 were high and people were keen to be there from the start. The official opening was held outside the gallery—in the underpass—the road was closed off. The APTs have always included Australia. And this poses the question why so few Asian-Australians were included. It was a deliberate curatorial decision not to make the exhibition about ourselves. They were other exhibitions, and a separate collecting activity. The focus was to be elsewhere—Australia as one amongst equals.

POSTSCRIPT

The Gallery had begun to buy contemporary Asian art, mainly Japanese, before the first APT. It was always planned that each APT—and the activity in between—would provide the opportunity to acquire work for the collection. As we know, the APT didn't cease after its third iteration. It became central to the Gallery's role and reputation. It was a cornerstone of advocacy for the case for a Gallery of Modern Art and this enjoyed bipartisan political support. It was an idea which took a long time to realize—about sixteen years from first thoughts to official opening. When Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party won eleven seats in the state election of 1998, Labor ruled with the support of an independent. One Nation's support base was largely regional. Premier Beattie told me that he

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couldn't announce a Gallery of Modern Art—so much money going into South Brisbane. He said it wouldn't last, to quietly get on with things and say nothing, that after the next election he'd come to the Gallery and announce GOMA. He did. After the next election One Nation had three members and a couple of weeks later Beattie came to the Gallery and announced GOMA was going to happen.

The media offered nothing but straightforward reporting and support. APTs aroused curiosity locally for an exhibition where, for the general public, artists were unknown, cultures not fully understood and where the more you knew the greater the experience. The collection developed, Asian programming between APTs increased and interests ranging from government, academia, museums and business were consolidated. Its success attracted international interest. In 2002, I was asked to speak at the Association of American Art Museum Directors Conference in Honolulu, where the questions were posed, how did the APT happen, how did it become the cultural marker of the Queensland Art Gallery's international profile? I recall the comment of one museum director whose Asian collections were regarded as one of the finest in America. It was more a lament than comment: "We have 4,000 years of Asian art history and nothing after 1930." The example of the APT was to help in changing that.

The idea that the West changes, effortlessly internationalizes and that Asian cultures must be true to their heritage and fodder for the West has collapsed in the past three decades. A particular art historical imperialism has vanished. One thing which pleased me most when I left the Gallery of Modern Art twenty years to the day after I had arrived was my farewell gift. But it wasn't for me. Anish Kapoor was commissioned for a work in recognition of the Gallery's commitment to the region and my role in it. He made a huge work, and it was pretty much done and delivered at cost. If there's a marker for the first APT and those that followed it is reciprocated generosity. The APTs were never exercises in doctrinaire ambition but careful and considered projects in profiling what is important and unfamiliar. As Premier Wayne Goss said, it makes us think differently about ourselves.

This is an edited transcript of 'Defining Moments: The First Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, 1993 with Doug Hall', part of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art's Lecture Series, 'Defining Moments: Australian Exhibition Histories 1968–1999', that takes a deeper look at the moments that have shaped Australian art since 1968, addressing key contemporary art exhibitions staged over the last three decades of the twentieth century and reflecting on the ways these exhibitions shaped art history and contemporary Australian culture more broadly.

For further information on this series, see <https://acca.melbourne/program/defining-moments-first-asia-pacific-triennial-of-contemporary-art/>.

Note

¹ Gerrymander, to manipulate the boundaries of an electoral constituency so as to favour one party or class

² Eugene von Guerard, an Austrian-born artist active in Australia from 1852 to 1882, known for his finely detailed landscapes in the tradition of the Dusseldorf school of painting

³ The Heidelberg School was an Australian art movement in the late nineteenth century, latterly described as Australian Impressionism

⁴ Kevin Rudd, Prime Minister of Australia, 2007–10 and 2013

⁵ Gough Whitlam, Prime Minister of Australia, 1972–75