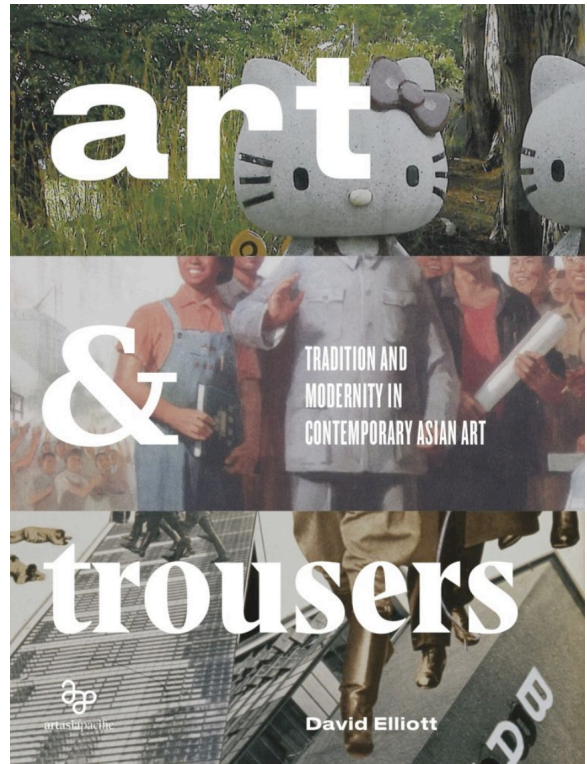


BOOK REVIEW:  
David Elliott, *Art & Trousers: Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Asian Art*

Adrian Favell



Who wears the trousers in contemporary art? As this beautifully produced collection of thirty-two essays demonstrates – design is handled by the top drawer UK designer, Jonathan Barnbrook, known for his stunning art book work with Damien Hirst – in the 1990s and 2000s, it was undoubtedly the roving global curator. The optimistic, expansive post-1989 era, which now seems so distant in the era of COVID and global lockdown, was a golden age of curation that enabled a select few, energetic, self-made artworld individuals to literally roam the planet, selecting artists and making art history, with sweeping new narratives and frameworks of popular and elite culture. Knitting together high art theory, an eye for radicalism, and a canny sense of commercial taste in a neoliberal era, they pieced together stunning portfolio careers with long CVs listing directorships of major city museums, the captaining of biennales and dozens of complex international exhibitions.

David Elliott, in this sense, is surely one of the emblematic figures of the era, and as this book underlines someone who perhaps merits as much attention for his curatorial achievements as more obvious global superstars such as the ubiquitous Hans Ulrich Obrist or Hou Hanru. The history of the trouser in Asia – which symbolises the hegemony of what Elliott calls the ‘self-righteous masculine character of Western colonization’, but which has *inter alia* also stood for gender emancipation and subaltern workers’ revolt – is the loosely worn organising thread of this ‘purposefully rambling’ collection. It epitomises Elliott’s central focus in this selection of his own lifework: of how contemporary art from Asia can be staged as a gripping, ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity, played out in the careers of global

contemporary artists from the region. Drawing on his involvement in both major collective shows and smaller individual retrospectives, Elliott powerfully talks through the lives and works of artists situated in particular political histories, building up a comprehensive view of the alternate pathways to modernity and nationhood that can be charted in, respectively, India, China, Japan, South East Asia, post-Soviet Eurasia, and Turkey. His skill and erudition as a curator is apparent throughout.

Elliott trained as an academic historian, but the pugnacious impulses of an anarchist punk rocker also shine through in this volume. The ease with which he tackles these vast topics would defy many academic specialists. Indeed, this protean, interdisciplinary Renaissance reach was the prerogative of the global curator figure of this era, and one wonders whether this kind of intellectual ambition can survive a post-global world, in which more dour and sober specialisms have reasserted themselves within predictable academic boundaries. While not neglecting the obvious relevance of postcolonial themes in this work – there is the occasional nod, say, to Frantz Fanon or Edward Said – Elliott generally has little patience for the scholastic theoreticism of the many curators who take their cues from the high table of art theory, presided over by arch figures such as Hal Foster. There is barely a whiff of French theory or *de rigueur* Marxism here – although, amusingly, Elliott does claim possession of the term ‘alterity’ (minus Lacan), while admitting it was ‘not a word I used’ at the time. No Nicolas Bourriaud or Okwui Enwezor he, then, although it would be interesting to ask what a Venice Biennale curated by Elliott would look like. Something like this book, it might be imagined: an often riotous celebration of art and politics, as a vibrant, technicolour world turned upside down and inside out, with as many women featured as men, and tradition and modernity jumbled up against each other, as irrepressible voices from the Global East and Global South edge themselves towards independence from Western colonialism.

This is to summarise Elliot’s distinctive signature *modus operandi*: the physical juxtaposition of scholarly well-grounded traditional artefacts with the subversive and dissonant voices of the contemporary, packaged for a ravenous, large public. This was something seen at its best in, for instance, his virtuoso opening show for the Mori Art Museum, ‘Happiness’, in 2001. Such shows, given the resources and backing of an institution such as this, showed just what he could do as a curator. As also does the narrative here detailing the complex collaborations and international relations negotiations involved in funding and gaining political clearance for the line of groundbreaking shows he put on in Oxford, at what is now Modern Art Oxford, in the 1980s and early 1990s, which presented serious, elaborated narratives of contemporary art from India, Japan and China for the first time in the West. His range has, in fact, extended well beyond this – including shows modestly not listed here, such as his involvement as co-curator in the extraordinary ‘Africa Remix’ of

2004. In a relatively short tenure at Mori, with the Mori family's backing, he initiated countless projects that had both serious art historical impact but which also transformed an essentially vanity corporate project into a major tourist destination. Throughout his career, his influence has worked from a peripheral, underdog position not aligned with the dominant, elite influence of curators wielding the institutional power of the Tate, the Pompidou or New York's MoMA.

Indeed, the importance of the early shows at Oxford, on India (1982), Japan (1985) and China (1993), have perhaps not yet had their art historical due. Emphasising, in each case, history, politics and contestation, they were vital in opening up new readings of the art history of each culture, but also in the more basic sense of establishing a contemporary Asian art not lost to archaeology and the fetishism of the pre-modern, nor conversely the view that these parts of the world had nothing to offer except pale simulations of the Western modern. Elliott's pioneering moves at the more modest Modern Art Oxford have been overshadowed by others' later work – notably Alexandra Munroe's rather more tepid survey of Japanese post-war art in 'Scream Against the Sky' (1994, at the Guggenheim in New York), or Obrist and Hanru's tours of Asian art in 'Cities on the Move' (1997–1999). Arguably these shows packaged their subjects in a tidier developmental view, ready for American consumption, and thus were much more effective in putting commercial value on their selections – perhaps most notoriously as seen in the gold rush in auction prices for Chinese contemporary art that followed the global curators' work.<sup>1</sup>

While always scholarly, Elliott does not ever really go in any depth into these more reflexive sociological issues about the (competitive) global artworld in which he was such a key player during these years (an epoch detailed brilliantly by Sarah Thornton in her *Seven Days in the Art World*, written at the height of the global boom).<sup>2</sup> Notably, although he jabs at the 'panjandrum' of the art world at one point — the 'art critics, academics, art dealers, collectors and some artists' who have kept Western interests at the heart of contemporary art's globalisation — Elliott typically treats artists themselves with reverence: they are always geniuses articulating the deep strata of their historical era. Thus, we do not get much sense of how their selection and presentation by curators such as Elliott has contributed, as it does, to the 'two economies of world art'.<sup>3</sup> A curator such as Elliott plays a vital role between the two: adding academic weight via museum prestige and catalogue discourse (the first 'economy'), while at the same time operating in a space close to the commercial market (the second), often in collaboration with gallerists and dealers. Only

<sup>1</sup> See Lotte Phillipsen, *Globalizing Contemporary Art*, Aarhus University Press, Aarhus, 2010

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, Granta, London, 2008

<sup>3</sup> See Malcolm Bull, 'The Two Economies of World Art', in Jonathan Harris, ed, *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2011, pp 179–190

occasionally does Elliott stop to reflect on this dual dynamic that ‘makes’ the art historical fame of major artists: for example, in the somewhat sceptical reflection here on the paradoxical career of the self-made activist hero, Ai Weiwei. Or the punchy New York show on contemporary Japanese art, ‘Bye Bye Kitty!!!’ (2011), in which he explicitly sought to counter the overwhelming commercial strategies marketing infantilised pop art for global markets, that had been so effectively established by Japan’s most famous international contemporary artist of the 1990s and 2000s, Takashi Murakami.

On the whole, Elliott’s own preferred artists are given more serious intentions, with strong and iconoclastic figures to the fore. His obvious joy at working with many of these names is apparent throughout the many shorter profiles that follow the reproduced essays from major collective shows. The tone is never academic and dry. Rather, Elliott vaunts their ribald and provocative freedoms, as artists engaged in playing with traditional vernacular forms that take the work outside the singular Western, modernising narrative. This might be referenced by the opening figure of the book: by Thai artist, Chatchai Puipia, in which a chubby figure with spiritual golden mask peers upside down from under a wide open anus; or, in his frequent celebration of Japan’s notoriously bad-boy art hero, Makoto Aida, here self-portrayed on page 13 wetting himself abjectly in front of a gaggle of Japanese schoolgirls. It is no accident perhaps that Elliott’s favourite trousers reference in Western art would appear to be the clowning *commedia dell’arte* figure of Pantalone, the greedy and lecherous stock figure that provides uncomfortable mass entertainment.

Elliott’s eye is roving rather than encyclopaedic. This is a beautiful gazetteer of contemporary Asian art, well referenced in history and its decentred account of the modern, but there is not extensive evidence of the utterly meticulous local travel and documentation that anchors the most important review of Asian art in Asia, the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, led by Raiji Kuroda. Kuroda’s work at Fukuoka,<sup>4</sup> not directly referenced, would indeed offer a more substantial base for the alternate, political view of Asian art presented here; another would be the vital work by Sydney-based art historian, John Clark. At Mori, Elliott was able to work with an outstanding team of younger curators – including names such as Mami Kataoka, Takashi Azumaya, Mizuki Takahashi and Eriko Osaka – and was backed up as co-director by the influential Fumio Nanjo. It was a remarkable instance of a foreign curator, without an extensive previous Japanese pedigree, taking on a hot seat built on global finance – a building empire – and effectively shifting the high culture orientations of the host society, as the museum achieved importance for the family as a credible epicentre of contemporary art. Indeed, Elliott’s most important achievement with the

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<sup>4</sup> See Raiji Kuroda, *Behind the Globalism: Sketches on Asian Contemporary Art 2009–2014*, gram Books, Tokyo, 2014

Mori family was, from the beginning, to insist that the new Roppongi Hills edifice had to be a real *art museum* as such, in line with other major international institutions. In fact, Tokyo had struggled to compete in the eyes of the global art world, with Hong Kong, Shanghai, Guangzhou in China, or even its counterpart in South Korea, Gwangju. The Mori Art Museum changed that. He tried to repeat the same feat in Istanbul at the Istanbul Modern, with a revisionist view of modernity and local politics, with less success. Perhaps thankfully, he escaped that political hot spot, operating in more recent years as a curator at major international biennales in cities around the world.

Now over seventy, Elliott shows no sign of letting up in his good-humoured ambition. This book documents and testifies to a career that would be the envy of more institutionally fixed figures. Rather, Elliott embodies a character in Thornton's vibrant artworld, living out her analysis of contemporary global art as the rock n' roll of the 1990s and 2000s; with the career of a roving global curator that much more exciting than the dull and worthy work, perhaps, that colleagues were doing at the bastions of national art power. From Oxford to Tokyo and back – via Stockholm, Kiev, Tashkent, Istanbul, Sydney, Berlin – it has surely been a good life.

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