‘The Asia-Pacific Effect’: Geo-Cultural Grouping at the Asia-Pacific Triennials

Lisa Chandler
University of the Sunshine Coast

The opening of Brisbane’s new Gallery of Modern Art in December 2006 reflects the substantial growth of the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) in both size and status over the last two decades. The Gallery has been recognised nationally and internationally for its leading role in the presentation of the Asia-Pacific Triennials of Contemporary Art, and its significant collection of art from the region will hold a prominent place in the expanded institution. Twenty years ago, however, the Gallery seemed an unlikely candidate to concentrate on such work, so what are the reasons for this dramatic change? This paper examines how QAG’s decision to focus on the geo-cultural category of ‘Asia-Pacific’ art created a distinctive grouping which enabled the Gallery to distinguish itself from other institutions. It also considers the implications for artists in being represented within this curatorial classification.

In December 2006, the Fifth Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art – APT5 – was presented as the opening exhibition at Brisbane’s new Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA), when the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) expanded into a single two-site institution. With the opening of GoMA, the two-site Queensland Art Gallery became ‘the second largest public art museum in Australia’. The addition to the existing Gallery has been established to house the institution’s expanding collections, including its significant holdings of contemporary Asian and Pacific art. Director Doug Hall claims that the new building, which is double the size of the existing Gallery, is a reward ‘for our own success’. Since the presentation of the First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (First APT) in 1993, QAG has gained national and international prominence by establishing an exhibition and acquisition focus on art from the Asia-Pacific region, yet twenty years ago, the Gallery seemed an unlikely candidate to concentrate on such work. Although it was not the only Australian institution involved in presenting contemporary art from the region in the 1990s, QAG’s decision to distinguish itself by collecting and exhibiting the art of this constructed geo-cultural grouping has substantially benefited the institution as well as many artists from the region.

When QAG presented the First APT in 1993, Caroline Turner, Deputy Director and Manager (International Programs) stressed that the notion of ‘Asia-Pacific’ is a constructed one. Turner observed that the use of the term ‘does not refer to any perceived homogeneity among countries of the region, but it is used in a purely geographical sense. There is no collective Asian identity, let alone an Asia-Pacific identity.’ Nevertheless there were advantages for the Gallery in concentrating on this collective cultural grouping and the Triennials have been central to the institution’s move into this collection sphere. They have engendered a substantial discourse encompassing both praise and criticism for the Gallery as it has negotiated the thorny terrain of representing disparate cultural perspectives through the APTs. A recurring debate has centred on the merits of organising an exhibition based on a geo-cultural grouping and the attendant emphases on nation and ethnicity that this implies. As QAG presents the Fifth Triennial which, like APT 2002, differs from the first three exhibitions in the series, this paper considers the impact of the First APT and examines some of
the implications of the Gallery’s decision to present artwork in the context of this collective ‘cultural whole’. ‘Asia-Pacific’ as a classificatory grouping represents a form of difference from other curatorial taxonomies. I will argue that being aligned with such a grouping can be both advantageous and limiting for artists, while by foregrounding this distinctive category QAG has accrued symbolic capital and successfully boosted its status within the artworld.  

A Project Waiting to be Done

When QAG presented the First APT in 1993, this large survey exhibition, initially envisaged as the first in a series of three, was heralded as ‘a major breakthrough in Australia’s hitherto patchy relationship with [contemporary] Asia-Pacific art’. It garnered considerable attention for the Gallery and enabled QAG to develop a collection of contemporary Asian and Pacific art, although initially the former collection area received far greater emphasis. In addition, the strength and degree of critical responses to the Triennial were indications of the project’s impact on the artworld, particularly in Australia and Asia. At the time, though, the Triennial endeavour and QAG’s long term commitment to presenting art from the region represented both a sizeable opportunity and risk for the institution.

The APTs offered the potential for the Gallery to make its mark in the artworld by identifying a niche collection area and responding to the under-representation of contemporary Asia-Pacific art within Australian and other Western art institutions. When the First APT was launched, Director Doug Hall observed:

> Australia’s cultural engagement with Asia has, more often than not, been conceived as art history, both through exhibitions and the development of collections ... In many ways the Gallery saw the development of the Triennial as a project waiting to be done. It broke the pattern of art museums’ preoccupation with the past; [and] defined a way, in both intellectual and organisational terms, in which Australia might construct a relevant forum for the presentation of Asian and Pacific contemporary art.

Hall’s discussion of a ‘project waiting to be done’ suggests that conditions existed for an institution to take the initiative and distinguish itself by presenting contemporary Asia-Pacific art as a valuable area for exhibition and collection. Beyond the issue of any institutional benefits, Hall’s remarks also identified an important role the Gallery could play in giving greater prominence to contemporary art practice in the region. Even so, the Gallery was taking a chance in its substantial commitment to this ‘unconventional’ collection area. Although various institutional and individual endeavours, such as the Artists’ Regional Exchange (ARX) in Perth and Asialink in Melbourne, had been fostering interactions with artists in the region prior to the instigation of the First APT, contemporary Asia-Pacific art did not have a substantial presence in major Australian galleries in the early 1990s.

Superficially, QAG appeared an unlikely candidate to focus on such work because its holdings of Asian and Pacific art were quite small. A move into this field might have seemed more probable from galleries with strong historical Asian art collections, such as the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of South Australia or the National Gallery of Australia. Hall implies that this was unlikely, however, because of a fixed focus on art from the past and a belief that such work was inherently more valuable and hence more worthy of collection. There was also less impetus for some of the more prestigious art museums with well-established collections to venture into the somewhat undefined realm of contemporary Asia-Pacific art. One explanation for this disposition to preserve existing conditions is provided by Pierre Bourdieu who argues that it is preferable for successful institutions ‘to perpetuate the status quo by maintaining themselves and the principles on which their dominance is based ... since they are on top ... excellence therefore consists in being what one is’.

Ironically, the limited nature of QAG’s overall holdings was a significant factor which contributed to the institution’s decision to foreground Asia-Pacific art. From the Gallery’s formation in 1895, issues such as a lack of permanent premises accompanied by limited staffing, funding and patronage had affected QAG’s ability to develop a comprehensive and distinctive collection compared to many...
other Australian art museums. Hall points out that the APT and ‘modern and contemporary Asian collection would not have eventuated’ had he ‘inherited a continuity of collections’. He explains that “[w]e couldn’t emulate the fabulous historical Asian collections of Melbourne and Sydney, so ... we’ve had to think of ways to engage with the region as well as produce something unique in Australia’ [my italics]. In 1987, when Hall joined the institution, QAG did not possess a legacy of nationally or internationally acclaimed collection strengths so the opportunity existed for it to claim a ‘new’ or distinctive collection area and to boost its reputation in the process.

Creating Distinctions

The Gallery’s actions in seeking to ‘produce something unique’, in other words, to distinguish itself from other Australian public galleries, reflect strategies which Bourdieu’s account of the ‘field of cultural production’ assists us to clarify. Bourdieu envisages the artworld as a domain comprised of practices and relationships constituting the physical and symbolic production, circulation and consumption of art, and proposes that the cultural field is essentially relational, as agents within it seek positions of greater prominence and undertake activity that creates distinctions from others. In this sphere, players are ‘positioned’ according to the degree of symbolic capital they possess and this is characterised by the attainment of status, recognition, authority and the power they confer. In the case of the artworld, actions which cause an art museum to distinguish itself favourably from others can accrue prestige and prominence for that institution. Such initiatives include representing the work of the most pre-eminent artists, and presenting and acquiring the work of artists or art movements ‘ahead of the game’. In addition, institutions with significant standing and symbolic capital possess greater authority to determine which practitioners remain or move into positions of importance. In this way, art museums invest particular forms of artistic production with value or belief in their value, and play an important role in legitimising some individuals or groups of artists over others.

In this domain, the impetus to shift positions inevitably comes from those with a lesser status, because agents with greatest authority, ‘those who have made their mark’, have a vested interest in maintaining their dominant status. The ‘initiative of change falls’ on those ‘who are also those least endowed with specific capital’, and in order to ‘occupy a distinct, distinctive position, they must assert their difference’.

Bourdieu argues that:

“Making one’s mark” … means winning recognition, in both senses, of one’s difference from other producers, especially the most consecrated of them; it means, by the same token, creating a new position, ahead of the positions already occupied, in the vanguard. (Hence the importance ... of all distinctive marks, such things as the names of schools or groups – words which make things, distinctive signs which produce existence).

For QAG, the prospect of ‘challenging’ larger and more prominent Australian public galleries by replicating and surpassing their collection strengths was not a feasible option. The Gallery sought to distinguish itself through difference, by looking for new or neglected areas for acquisition so it could be ‘ahead of the game’ and break from expected patterns of collecting. Considered as a cultural whole, the ‘distinctive signs’ of Asia-Pacific art and an emphasis on regional and geographical groupings were a potential means of delineating such differences.

Within the context of Bourdieu’s model, QAG’s commitment to Asia-Pacific art can thus be attributed in part to an institutional disposition to boost the organisation’s trajectory and reputation, however, there were numerous other reasons for the Gallery’s shift in direction from the late 1980s. In fact, QAG had previously considered the potential of developing distinctive collection areas incorporating Asia-Pacific art, but these proposals had not been realised due to the competing needs of other curatorial spheres as well as staffing and funding shortages. Other factors needed to coalesce in order to facilitate change at the Gallery. These included the vision and interests of particular individuals, the development of projects engaging with contemporary Asian art, a revision
of acquisition policy and historically specific conditions of time and place which were all significant in contributing to the institution’s decision to focus on the collective grouping of Asia-Pacific art.

**Factors Facilitating Change**

A major catalyst for this shift occurred in 1987 with the appointment of a new Board of Trustees, a new Chairman of Trustees, Richard Austin, and Doug Hall as Gallery Director. A substantial review of institutional structures and policies soon followed. In his inaugural public speech at the institution, Austin emphasised the importance of QAG’s geographical position, declaring that as ‘a gallery on the periphery of Asia’ it should ‘take account of’ the region’s art, although he also stressed the practical difficulties of such a strategy, given the cost and availability of historical Asian works and the existing strengths of other Australian galleries. Austin’s words were not empty rhetoric, but rather reflected his profound interest in and advocacy of Asian art as an important collection area for the institution. Austin had extensive expertise and connections in Asia, particularly in Japan, was fluent in several Asian languages, and was influential in promoting a major consciousness of Asia within the institution.

While acknowledging Austin’s views and his preference for traditional Asian art, Hall wished to develop the Gallery as a dynamic centre for contemporary art. In addition, Deputy Director and Manager of International Programs Caroline Turner had been intrinsically involved in institutional exchanges and exhibitions of Asian art up to this point, so these individual visions contributed to a decision to foreground contemporary Asia-Pacific art. The Gallery still needed to determine how this new focus would be realised, so in revising its Acquisition Policy, QAG took into account ‘the collecting policies of other State galleries’ in its considerations of Asian and Pacific art as potential ‘new areas of collecting’. Although the institution recognised ‘the important regional role’ it could play, it was not yet specific about the ‘extent to which the indigenous art of the Pacific and Asian arts’ would be incorporated within the collection.

In the 1980s, a curatorial exchange between QAG and the Museum of Modern Art in Saitama also provided a springboard for the Gallery’s engagement with art from the region and employed a model of co-curatorship which subsequently influenced selection processes for the early APTs. This fruitful collaboration resulted in the presentation of *Japanese Ways, Western Means*, a comprehensive exhibition featuring contemporary Japanese art held at QAG in 1989. While the Gallery could have continued to present specialised displays drawing on the art of single nations, it opted instead for the Triennial model. The grander scale of the three proposed ‘blockbuster’ shows would attract greater attention, and provide Brisbane’s response to major contemporary art initiatives, such as the Sydney Biennale, instigated by other Australian art museums. If successful, the Triennials would signal the Gallery’s claims as a player in the domain of contemporary Asia-Pacific art, enabling it to ‘make its mark’ and, in Bourdieu’s terms, to garner symbolic capital in the process.

The Triennial series would be costly and complex to mount, however, and presented the institution with numerous challenges, such as overcoming its limited knowledge of and connections with practitioners in the region. In 1990, Turner surmised that ‘[m]y own belief is that it will take 10 years for us to feel confident in these relationships and in our engagement with the art of the region.’ The Gallery’s initial decision to stage three Triennials demonstrated its commitment to presenting Asia-Pacific art, and while this certainly helped to legitimise QAG’s move into this domain, motivations beyond institutional self-interest contributed to the Gallery’s resolve. QAG’s long-term undertaking was also an important means of valuing and de-marginalising contemporary Asia-Pacific art. In addition, the institution sought to eliminate gaps in both public and disciplinary knowledge and to a greater understanding of regional art practice. This was evidenced from the First APT in the Gallery’s attention to a range of areas beyond the exhibition itself, including the presentation of an associated conference, scholarly publications, substantial educational programs, artist and curators’ talks and the development of a library research collection dedicated to Asia-Pacific art.

Historically specific conditions of time and place were additional factors which enabled the QAG to benefit from an Asia-Pacific collection focus, as government economic and cultural initiatives in
the region were being promoted at this time. Although political rhetoric was positioning Australia as part of Asia, the Gallery ‘concentrated on the Asia-Pacific so that Australia can be included in this grouping’ and because the project could more justifiably be initiated by an Australian institution. It also provided a point of difference from existing survey exhibitions of contemporary Asian art such as the Fukuoka expositions in Japan. Although other Australian art institutions had presented exhibitions of contemporary Asian art in the early 1990s, the Triennial concept reflected a more sustained commitment to collecting and exhibiting art from the region. Around this time, the Sydney Biennale management considered a proposal from Asialink Visual Arts Manager Alison Carroll to feature contemporary Asian art but opted to continue with its existing model, so the opportunity existed for QAG to differentiate itself by foregrounding art from the region.

Growing economic and trade ties between Australia and Asia created an environment in which the Gallery could profit in both symbolic and financial terms, because funding bodies were more readily disposed to support projects incorporating artists from the Asia-Pacific region. The Australia Council’s re-organisation of its funding preferences to allocate an increasing portion of its international projects budget for Asian or Pacific-oriented initiatives in the early 1990s, is an example of these shifting priorities. Consequently, QAG was successful in obtaining substantial grants from the organisation’s Visual Arts/Crafts Board to facilitate the development of the First APT. Sizeable financial support also came from the Queensland Government which saw the project as enhancing both the Gallery’s and its own relationships with the region. In addition, QAG’s Exhibition Development Fund, initiated in 1989 and consisting of significant contributions from Japanese corporations with business interests in Australia and matched by Queensland Government subsidies, provided the institution with important seed funding for the Triennial endeavour.

There were further, more intangible benefits for QAG in developing a strategic commitment to presenting Asia-Pacific art. As Asian economies prospered, the region was viewed not only as a ground for fruitful economic and cultural enterprises, but in the Australian imaginary it was also being associated with positive notions of dynamism, energy and growth. In the early 1990s, Prime Minister Paul Keating linked the Republican debate and Australia’s ‘Asian Turn’, arguing that Australia’s future lay with Asia and not with the tired ties to the British monarchy. David Walker suggests that this rhetoric reflected a narrative of Australian cultural renewal so that Asia was seen as ‘the catalyst we needed to break the mould of the past and project a new future’. Against this background, a major Gallery project engaging with the region could be seen as aligned with these affirmative ideas of innovation and dynamism, and thus functioned as a symbolically profitable move for the institution, while also playing an important role in giving greater prominence to Asian and Pacific art.

Representation by Nation

When Queensland Premier Wayne Goss officially opened the First APT in September 1993, most of the Gallery’s spaces were taken up by Triennial artworks and the substantial number of installations contributed to the monumental sense of scale conveyed by the entire exhibition. The display included over two hundred works by seventy-six artists from twelve countries. Artists, writers and curators attended the opening celebrations and the scope, activity and ‘freshness’ of the exhibition and associated programs invested the opening days with ‘sense of excitement’ and dynamism, generating for many visitors ‘a life and an energy that have not often been as palpable in the Gallery before’. On many levels the First APT represented a significant achievement for QAG, but despite considerable popular and critical success, the Gallery also faced criticism for some of its approaches. While QAG was benefiting from foregrounding Asia-Pacific art, the organisation of the First APT as an exhibition unconnected by theme and structured around national groupings was problematic in many ways. The survey model facilitated the display of a large selection of varied work through which viewers could familiarise themselves with the diversity of regional practice. An organisational framework based on nation was one way of imposing structure on the disparate array of works, however, this emphasis on nation – within the catalogue, the selection process, and to a large extent through display – risked oversimplifying and essentialising works as synecdoches of nation. This
could be seen in critical commentary which centred on exclusions of countries rather than individual artists. QAG was admonished for the under-representation of art from the Pacific and its ‘token representation of areas such as Hong Kong, Papua New Guinea, Singapore and Vietnam’, while there were further concerns about the lack of inclusion of work from the Indian sub-continent, Burma, Sri Lanka and Taiwan. In addition, a confidential survey of event participants revealed concerns about ‘the numbers allocated to each country’ and while artists’ feedback regarding curatorial philosophy and display was ‘highly favourable … some suggested more mingling of artists’ work and a non national approach’.

Hall claims that the selected countries were chosen for pragmatic reasons involving existing connections and logistical matters. Nevertheless, these criticisms highlight the problem of presenting an exhibition drawn from a ‘constructed’ geographical region and perpetuate perceptions that artists were selected as representatives of nation. Although this was not QAG’s intention, Turner admitted that approaching the exhibition ‘through national contexts … raises significant questions’, adding ‘it is our hope that further countries be included in the next Triennial. In the future art may be selected other than nationally’. In structuring the exhibition around Asia-Pacific art, a balance needed to be found between the extremes of essentialising artists and their work as somehow representative of their country of origin, and considering such art only in terms of global art practice while ignoring local specificities. Thematic organisation, cross-cultural relationships, and alternative groupings of works were all possible solutions to these difficult presentation issues.

Despite the criticisms, the Triennial project contributed to the validation of contemporary Asia-Pacific art as a ‘collective whole’ within the broader context of international art, a point that Malay artist and critic Redza Piyadasa expounded in a series of articles coinciding with the First APT. Piyadasa argued that Euro-American centres of power had largely ignored Asian modern and contemporary art in art historical discourse. He suggested that the significance of the APT was its break with Euro-American artistic hegemony and commended QAG for choosing ‘to further legitimise the modern artists of the Asia-Pacific countries’. Piyadasa does not argue that modern and contemporary art from the region had no status prior to the Triennial but suggests that in the field of Western art discourse, particularly within Australia, QAG played a major role in validating contemporary Asia-Pacific art and boosting its trajectory in this domain.

**Gaining Recognition**

QAG had taken a significant risk in committing to both the Triennial project and acquiring contemporary Asia-Pacific art, and while it had been criticised for some of its approaches, the Gallery’s efforts contributed to the processes of ‘making a name for itself’ and gaining recognition in the field. Many writers and participants praised the institution for its actions and a year after the event Piyadasa claimed the Triennial ‘has earned for QAG a new and enviable reputation as a truly innovative art museum within the Asia-Pacific region. Its international reputation has certainly been considerably enhanced’. An extensive discourse was generated by the project and in a Gallery report summarising critical responses, Natalie King concludes: ‘On balance, the opinions expressed in reviews are positive with a general consensus that the scale and contents of the project signalled initiative and marked an ambitious development in the presentation of contemporary art from the Asia-Pacific region.’ In addition there were strong attendances at both the exhibition and related conference. These factors demonstrate that QAG’s activities in foregrounding contemporary Asia-Pacific art as a distinctive grouping, allowing it to ‘establish difference’ from other institutions, had succeeded in attracting considerable attention. The kudos gained through presentation of the APT enabled QAG to accrue symbolic capital as it grew in stature as a credible venue for the collection and presentation of dynamic contemporary art from the region.

In spite of the increasing presence of art from the region in temporary exhibitions in Australian art museums, QAG was the first such institution to establish Asia-Pacific art as a dedicated collection area. Hall expressed the hope that this unorthodox move would enable the institution to gain prominence in the field and he was assisted in this aim when The Myer Foundation and Michael
and Anne Gamble Myer provided a major financial donation which allowed the fledgling collection to expand considerably. By 1995, Anna Clabburn observed that despite starting ‘with a relatively small historical collection, Queensland set one of the most progressive agendas in the country in 1993 when it decided to collect contemporary Asian art’. Clabburn adds that following the First APT’s success ‘some curators have signalled their intention to collect contemporary work although this is still a very fresh frontier’ QAG’s focus on contemporary Asia-Pacific art was unusual because it emphasised a curatorial category that did not exist in Australian galleries at this time. Although several art museums employed a Curator of Asian Art, the category of ‘Contemporary Asia-Pacific Art’ did not readily fit into established structures existing in such institutions. The opportunity for collection development facilitated by the Triennials and the Gallery’s efforts to differentiate itself from other institutions enabled QAG to break with this established practice and to build a distinctive collection ‘ahead of the game’. This has subsequently been built into a collection of international significance which will be highlighted at GoMA.

When the Second APT was presented in 1996, the issue of artist representation within an Asia-Pacific grouping was one of the many issues debated in discourse emanating from the event. The sense of ‘newness’ or first-time encounter remarked upon at the first exhibition was played down at the second. Nick Jose, for example, suggested that many of the selected artists had reached a position of orthodoxy in international ‘circuits of exchange’ and that ‘contemporary art of the Pacific, as the youngest arrival, took the avant-garde mantle for this APT’. Certainly, while some artists were already acclaimed within the international arena, this was not the case for all APT practitioners, many of whom were seeking to achieve recognition beyond their own immediate area. American critic Judith Stein’s comments that, ‘apart from work by the few Japanese and Chinese artists who had previously exhibited in Venice and New York, the art was entirely new to me’ suggest that the Triennials were playing a valuable role in contributing to the recognition and legitimisation of the work of many artists from the region.

The increased attention given to artists at the APTs raised the complex issue of representation as part of a constructed ‘cultural whole.’ Jose notes that some Triennial visitors ‘complained that the APT was damaging itself by stressing regionalism at the expense of quality and conceptual clarity’. This perspective centres on the view, expressed by South Korean curator Soyeon Ahn, that ‘national identity should hide itself under the brilliant individuality of each artist’, or that practitioners should be recognised on the basis of their individual talent and not their cultural background. Ideally this would be the case, and certainly many artists from outside Euro-American art centres have been acknowledged in their own right without being presented as part of a focused regional or cultural grouping. Nevertheless, the structures of the artworld operate so that it is necessary to ‘gain entry’ into exhibition circuits in order to have artistic excellence recognised, and these processes are not always ‘democratic’ and globally inclusive. The practical realities of continuing Euro-American domination of the international contemporary artworld mean that while greater opportunities now exist for international exposure, it is harder for artists far from art centres to have their work regularly seen by those in positions of power with the ability to consecrate artists and artworks through exhibition, collection and discourse.

The benefits of exhibiting in the Asia-Pacific Triennial were remarked on by many of the participating artists. Indonesian artist Marintan Sirait noted that ‘a lot of participants, especially myself, might have difficulties in joining other events/exhibitions’ while Michael Mel remarked that ‘[w]e are grateful for the opportunity to present our art as we present it in Papua New Guinea … our performances have not been given the same opportunities overseas.’ Thai practitioner Kamin Lertchaiprasert commented that ‘I have learnt a great deal from other colleagues … and it was a wonderful experience for my career as an artist.’ Others stressed the impact of the event on the region. Vivian Sundaram described the APT as ‘a very special coming together of what we consider to be the “beginnings” of a very dynamic art movement … The avant-garde is here’, while Jose Tence Ruiz surmised that events such as the APT result in a ‘more vigorous inter-Asian scene, a long overdue re-orientation of parochial tendencies … and a shift in value application’. Thus, although the Triennials’ focus on national-cultural representation was problematic in some ways, the project...
was beneficial in providing a forum, growing in terms of recognition and legitimacy, enabling critics, historians and artists to become familiar with the work of practitioners from the region.

The ‘Asia-Pacific Effect’

In the 1990s, the APT series coincided with the development of a number of other large-scale international exhibitions showcasing work from artists outside Euro-American art centres. Together they created an alternative art circuit for practitioners who may have been excluded from similar events in Europe and America, while also providing a conduit to such prestigious international exhibitions. Collectively these ‘non-mainstream’ enterprises, located in de-centralised, predominantly non-Western cities, established a counter discourse to dominant Western art hegemonies and the APTs, with their geo-cultural emphasis, played a role in this ongoing activity of de-centring contemporary art practice. In considering the impact of the Triennials and other regional events, Jen Webb refers to what she terms the ‘Asia-Pacific effect’. Webb reasons that although Asia-Pacific is a constructed region, because it has been created ‘in language by powerful … national and geopolitical entities … there is an effect of Asia-Pacific which allows us to talk about it as a Real thing.’ This collective Asia-Pacific effect has created a space of power offering regional artists the ability ‘to represent themselves rather than be represented by old colonialist patterns and practices.’ Webb concludes that ‘because it is being generated by powerful … institutions, agents and practices,’ the Asia-Pacific effect establishes a domain in which regional artists, curators and critics ‘can claim a legitimated voice … and challenge the hegemony of “Euramerican” narratives, values and aesthetics.’

While there are advantages in collective representation, for practitioners operating outside art ‘centres’ there is a tension between garnering benefits by being presented as part of a national or cultural grouping, and having one’s art viewed in and of itself. Niranjan Rajah, whose work was exhibited at the Second APT, remarked:

> As an artist who represents himself, I am delighted at the widening field of visibility and will, surely, attempt to exploit its possibilities. However, as an art historian and theorist who “…represents” the art of his country, I feel the need to urge caution … It is important that in the “synchrony” of their engagement with the international scene, our contemporary artists take care not to detach themselves from the “diachrony” of Malaysian art history.

Rajah acknowledges the tangible benefits of increased artworld prominence but expresses concern that artists’ works are understood and situated within their originating context, so the question of how artists represent themselves and how they are categorised by art institutions is a complex one and may shift in different circumstances. At the Second APT, a grouping of indigenous Australian and Pacific artists was grouped collectively as ‘Pacific Peoples’ in order ‘to represent themselves’, allowing ‘a right of reply to the imposition of Western ways of seeing’. All Stock Must Go! (1996) an installation and performance by the Campfire Group, a collective of primarily indigenous Australian artists, included a cattle truck parked outside QAG’s entrance, overflowing with items of Aboriginal art available for sale. In this instance, the artists deliberately chose to locate their work outside the Gallery, both literally and metaphorically. For many artists, however, it is important to be presented ‘both ways,’ or rather, in multiple ways so as not to be envisaged in terms of cultural essences since ‘difference’ is flexible and fluid and thus unable to be constrained by rigid cultural distinctions. The Triennials and the discourse engendered by them provided a forum through which such issues could be played out, and in presenting work under the rubric of ‘Asia-Pacific’ QAG negotiated this complex territory in seeking to balance an acknowledgement of the value of difference with a recognition of individual and cultural fluidity.

Making a Mark

The recent announcement of the retirement of QAG director Doug Hall has provided a timely opportunity to reflect on how the Gallery’s position in the artworld has changed significantly since the mid 1980s. The Triennials have received over 500 000 visitors and have attracted national and
international attention for the institution, while the launch of the *Fifth Triennial* at GoMA, which houses the institution’s substantial collection of contemporary Asian and Pacific art, is evidence of the astuteness of QAG’s resolution to foreground Asia-Pacific art. As Bourdieu has argued, to ‘make one’s mark’ and gain recognition within the artworld, players need ‘to occupy a distinct, distinctive position, they must assert their difference, get it known and recognised, get themselves known and recognised’. 48 The Gallery’s decision to differentiate itself by creating an exhibition and collection focus centred on the geo-cultural grouping ‘Asia-Pacific’ was informed by a complex set of circumstances in which the disposition of Gallery personnel to re-position the institution coincided with historically specific factors, as well as personal and institutional connections in the region. This decision has enabled QAG to successfully boost its status within the artworld. The prestige attained through these efforts has allowed the institution to accrue symbolic capital and gain in prominence as a significant venue for the collection and presentation of contemporary Asian and Pacific art.

While QAG has clearly profited from establishing an Asia-Pacific focus, for individual artists there are both advantages and limitations in being represented within national or cultural groupings. The *Triennials* have contributed to a greater awareness of art practice in the region, and subsequently, works by practitioners from the Asia-Pacific have been far more prevalent in major Australian art institutions, in displays of Asian, Pacific and international contemporary art. In addition, the *APTs* have provided opportunities for many practitioners previously marginalised from mainstream Euro-American-dominated artworld circuits. Moreover, the *Triennials*, along with major survey exhibitions featuring artists from the region, have created an ‘Asia-Pacific effect’ by collectively de-centring international art practice and establishing a discourse which counters dominant Euro-American perspectives. Despite these benefits, categorisation as part of a cultural or national grouping can also be limiting for artists because although an understanding of the originating context and cultural specificities is important, classification by country or ethnicity risks reducing artists and their work to representations of nation. The *APTs* and the discourse engendered from them continue to provide a significant forum in which such complex questions are negotiated. The focus of the *Triennial* enterprise has relied on presenting various ‘differences’ – Asia-Pacific art as distinguished, for instance, from Euro-American art. Although there were problematic aspects to the representation by nation evidenced in the early *Triennials* they have nevertheless been effective in creating a space that has unsettled various orthodoxies, and played a role in legitimising Asia-Pacific contemporary art practice within Australia and the broader artworld.

Notes

1Queensland Art Gallery 2005, ‘Queensland Gallery of Modern Art’, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, viewed 2 December 2005, <http://www.qag.qld.gov.au/gqma>. The new institution will exceed the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Australia in size and only the National Gallery of Victoria will be larger. This focus on size, rather than the collection within, is reminiscent of the publicity surrounding QAG’s move to the South Brisbane site in 1982, when the architecture and scale of the new building received considerable attention. The Queensland Government will fund the construction costs of over $100 million.


7Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p.83.


In the 1950s, director Robert Haines considered that the Honolulu Art Gallery, which included a fine selection of historical Asian art, provided a relevant model for QAG which could also benefit from ‘a good Oriental collection because we, like Honolulu, are such close neighbours of the East’. P. J. Moroney, ‘An Art Gallery for Queensland’, unidentified thesis, University of Queensland, 1958, p.24. In the mid 1980s, prior to Hall’s appointment as director, the Gallery considered focusing its contemporary international art collection on works from Pacific rim countries including ‘America, Japan and countries of the Pacific, including New Zealand’. Jenny Harper, ‘Queensland Art Gallery. European Art Collection Policy. Discussion Paper Only, September 1985’, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1985, p.2.

Caroline Turner, ‘Session 1’, in Yasuko Furuichi and Aki Hoashi (eds), Symposium: ‘Asian Contemporary Art Reconsidered’, ARLink, vol. 20, no. 2, 2000, p.39. As part of this collaborative exchange, a reciprocal exhibition of Australian art was sent to Japan.

Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production.

1 Author conversations with the late Richard Austin, and Caroline Turner, interview with the author, Canberra, 22 November 2000. Austin’s enthusiasm for Japanese art and culture is all the more remarkable given that during the Second World War he was shot and held as a prisoner of war by the Japanese, interned in Changi prison camp and later worked on the notorious Burma railway.


5 The exhibition title later become something of an embarrassment for QAG, as Turner reveals: ‘In retrospect its thesis, summed up in the title, that Japanese art was a fusion of East and West, failed to take into account the more complex and unique qualities of Japanese eclecticism’. Caroline Turner, ‘Transcending time: the enigma of Japanese contemporary art’, ARLink, vol. 20, no. 2, 2000, p.40. As part of this collaborative exchange, a reciprocal exhibition of Australian art was sent to Japan.

6 Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production.


9 Alison Carroll, interview with the author, Brisbane, 29 October, 2005. See also Queensland Art Gallery, ‘Briefing Paper for Trustees for Noting, Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art’, 24 July 1991. The inaugural Sydney Biennale in 1973 had incorporated artists from East Asia and although the intent was to continue with such inclusions, it continued to give emphasis to European and American art.

10 In 1990-91, 12.5% of the Australia Council international budget was designated for Asian or Pacific focused initiatives, while this allocation was increased to 25% in 1991-92 and to 50% in 1992-93. Australia Council for the Arts, Sydney, 1992; Australia Council for the Arts, Annual Report 1991-92, Australia Council for the Arts, Sydney, 1992; Australia Council for the Arts, Annual Report 1992-93, Australia Council for the Arts, Sydney, 1993.


12 The EDF was not targeted to any particular exhibition but it was intended that monies be applied to important projects that would gain substantial critical and public attention. By the early 1990s the combined corporate and government contributions amounted to over one million dollars.


14 Pat Hoffie, ‘Dissolutions, Requiem, And small hopes’, Peripher, no. 17, November 1993, p.9. The selected countries were Australia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, The Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam. India was originally included but subsequently omitted due to logistics and lack of contacts.


Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*.


Natalie King, ‘Reviewing Reviews: Cold Reservation or Showered with Compliments’, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1994, p.1. Turner further quantifies and summarises the responses stating that ‘of approximately 250 articles … in over 200 publications from throughout Australia, the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, the overwhelming majority were supportive, calling the Triennial one of the most important projects ever undertaken by an art institution’. C. Turner, unpublished section of published letter, *Courier Mail*, 28 June 1995, p.18.

Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p.106.

State of the Art, ‘Doug Hall interview’, *State of the Art*, July-October 1992, p.15. The Myer Foundation donated $150 000 while an additional $150 000 over three years was provided by Michael Myer and Anne Gamble Myer. This support facilitated the formation, in 1993, of the Kenneth and Yasuko Myer Collection of Contemporary Asian Art, established in memory of these two prominent advocates of Asian and, in particular, Japanese art.


Nick Jose, ‘Over the Borders’, *Australian, The Australian’s Review of Books*, 13 November 1996, pp.15-18. As Jose suggests, Asian artists and contemporary Asian art had received a greater emphasis at the First APT but by the second exhibition in the series, there was a noticeable increase in Pacific artists’ presence at the event.

Judith E. Stein, ‘Pacific Basin Futures’, *Art in America*, June 1997, p.60. In addition, for some artists whose work was critical of political and social conditions it was extremely difficult to exhibit within their own country.

Jose, p.16.


Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p.58.