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HAMMAD NASAR ON ART

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LETTER FROM
TEHRAN



An exhibit from *A Lofty Retreat from the Red Dust: The Secret Garden of Emperor Qianlong*, which showed at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 2012

Reimagining the museum

From East to West, Asia is in the midst of an art boom with no end in sight. But the knowledge infrastructure is nascent and the curatorial depth lacking. How can archives and institutions cope, document this extraordinary flourishing, and enable narratives that help explain the present and explore different histories of the past?

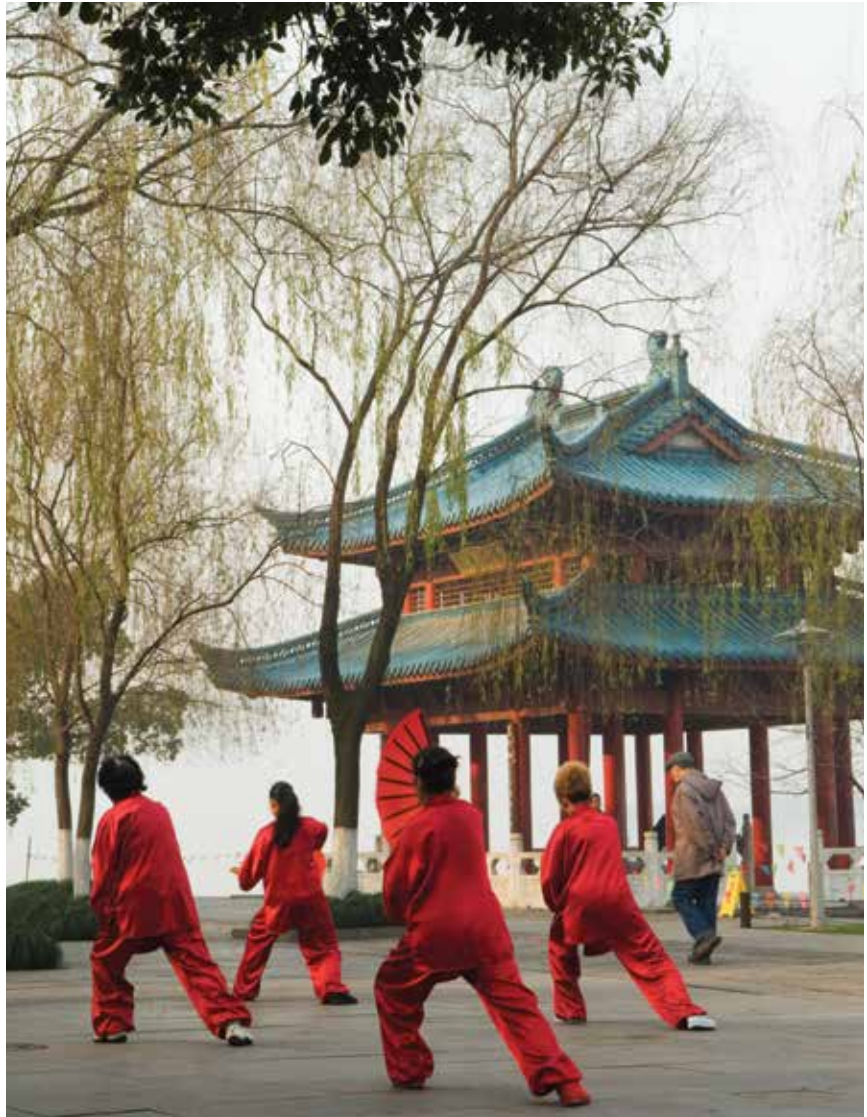
WRITTEN BY **HAMMAD NASAR**

Every morning I pass a group of Hong Kongers practicing Tai Chi on my way to work. Tai Chi is, depending on your persuasion, a sort of moving meditation with strong health associations, or a Chinese martial art for self-defense. I was first taught it by an American in London nearly two decades ago, and it is his New York accent I hear in my mind every morning, reminding me that “Tai Chi is all in the legs”.

For those who have not themselves experienced the form but only seen it (in person or in films), this may seem surprising. For what draws the viewer’s immediate attention is not the practitioners’ legs but their arms and hands, as they form slow, graceful circles, move from side to side and assume poised positions with marvelously evocative names. (“Crane spreads its wings” and “Grasp the sparrow’s tail” are two of my favorites.)

But for anyone new to the practice of Tai Chi, it is through one’s aching legs that the truth of my teacher’s pronouncement makes itself felt. Shifting the body’s weight from one foot to the other, Tai Chi hinges on the body’s connection with the earth or the ground. The legs are the body’s roots. They literally ground us. And it is this groundedness that propels the arms to flow into the various positions.

Ever since my move to Hong Kong last year, Tai Chi and its reliance on the legs as roots has struck me as an apt metaphor for the work my colleagues and I do at the Asia Art Archive (AAA). We try, in concert with like-minded colleagues elsewhere, to build and share a body of materials encouraging research and new thinking around recent art in Asia. We do this by accumulating, and making freely available, both physical material – books, catalogues, ephemera – accessible on-site, and digital copies of primary material – manuscripts, photographs, records – increasingly accessible online. This is buttressed by research to prioritize and select what to bring into the archive, and programming to put these materials into circulation. We are, to stretch that Tai Chi metaphor, part of a collective effort to build the discursive roots on whose strength recent art in Asia can flow into all manner of waving arms and hands.



Women practicing Tai Chi in front of a pavilion on West Lake, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China

For in the art world in Asia, if you haven’t noticed, there is a lot of arm waving going on. We are in the midst of a boom. Museums are being built. Collections are being assembled. Art fairs are being launched, developed and acquired. Gallery branches are being opened. Artists are being priced out of their studios as they gentrify urban pockets for property developers. And this is happening in distinctive but interestingly parallel ways in both East Asia (China, Singapore, Hong Kong) as well as in West Asia (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Qatar, Sharjah).

But this boom is also happening in an environment where the knowledge infrastructure around art on the ground is at best nascent and undernourished, and at worst

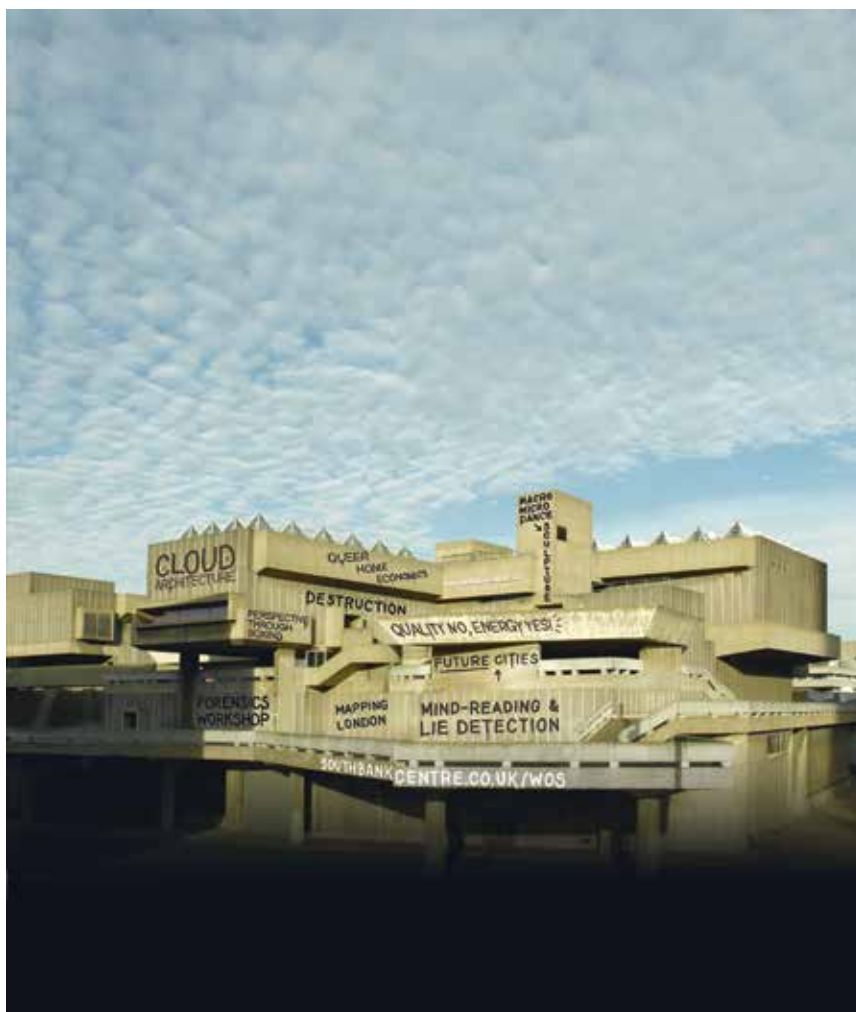
non-existent: where significant academies producing significant scholarship are thin on the ground: where museums with deep and canon-making collections, and substantial research efforts, are sparse: where there is a lack of skilled resources – not just of art historians, curators and museum directors, but also of educators, researchers, conservators, art writers, editors, translators, publishers, and distributors.

WHAT IS ART? WHAT IS A MUSEUM?

Artists notice things about the world. They then point them out to the rest of us in their works. Art thus becomes a way for us to make sense of the world – of making meaning. By collecting art, museums accumulate these meanings and fashion them into stories they tell us through their exhibitions, publications and programs. These stories are many-layered – about the art itself, about the artists that made it, about the communities they come from, and about their collective place in the world.

The stories are also self-perpetuating, and generative, in the sense that every artwork comprises ideas that can be reinterpreted over time: ideas that can be recontextualized and reimagined through every instance of display, through each interaction. Museums thus become not just a static compendium of objects, but also a repository of ideas that can be rearranged in infinite combinations to create new stories.

But how do museums cope with art in what the theorist Irit Rogoff has called its “expanded field”? For that perennial question, “what is art?”, has never had the range of possible answers that it does now. It can take the form of London’s Hayward Gallery’s *Wide Open School* – a self-described “unusual experiment in learning” – where more than 100 artists from 40 different countries devised and delivered programs in classrooms built in the Hayward’s galleries. Or it can be a Louis Vuitton boutique within an exhibition by the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Or a community center for a social housing estate in New York’s gritty Bronx borough, devised by the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn as a monument to Antonio Gramsci, the philosopher and erstwhile leader of the Italian Communist Party. Or the curatorial talk at the Sharjah Biennial transformed into an Urdu *qawwali*, more usually associated with Sufi mystical poetry, at the behest of the Egyptian artist Wael Shawky.



“The stories are also self-perpetuating, and generative, in the sense that every artwork comprises ideas that can be reinterpreted over time”

Wide Open School, at the Hayward Gallery in London, allowed visitors to engage directly with artists from all over the world, from June to July 2012

Perhaps the most mind-bending artwork of recent times was not billed as an artwork at all. Damien Hirst’s 2008 Sotheby’s auction, titled *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever*, realized a total of \$200 million for 223 artworks on the eve of the collapse of the American bank, Lehman Brothers, which heralded the widespread and devastating financial crisis, the aftermath of which we are still living through. If art is indeed about making sense of the world, of making meaning, then this was perhaps one of the most polemically incisive artworks of the century so far.

But if art is all these things, how can

museums cope? What should they collect and what should they do? This conundrum is perhaps best captured in the very name of Hong Kong's museum in the making: M+. The name articulates the desire to exceed the common understanding of what museums are and can be. But as M+ and other museums in Asia find themselves wrestling with these issues, they have a number of examples to look to in the rest of the world.

The foundation of the New Museum in New York, in 1977, as “an exhibition, information, and documentation center for contemporary art” was one of the first instances of new institutions for a new art. In recent formations (or reimaginings) a number of institutions around the world are testing conceptions of a “post-object” museum, in which archival materials and research processes themselves become objects of display, often alongside the art works they are attached to, but sometimes even entirely negating the need for the latter.

The Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven fashions itself as a “public site”, its collection as “cultural memory” and, when elaborating on its collection, lists its archives alongside artworks. Istanbul's SALT does not even mention artworks, concerning itself with “visual and material culture”, and its pursuit of “innovative programs for research and experimental thinking” in the “space between different disciplines”.

Such a framing of museums conflates them with archives. That can, of course, be productive – but not always. When formulations forged in places with excess seep their way into places with lack (and vice versa), they can lose their efficacy. They can succumb to an epistemological jet lag. Museums require different registers in which to operate, depending on their operational context.

The New Museum operates in the space made available and enriched by a vast array of New York institutions – behemoths like MOMA, the Whitney, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Guggenheim; as well as myriad smaller institutions such as Studio Museum Harlem. This creates a density of references and a plurality of institutional missions and curatorial strategies that feed off and inform each other. Where in Asia (with the possible and partial exception of Japan) do we even come close to such density?



Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* was an art installation located at Forest Houses, in the Bronx, New York, from July to September 2013

CONSTRUCTING THE PAST

Moving to Hong Kong after nearly two decades in Europe, I can attest that being based in Asia gives you a different orientation towards time: it is the future that dominates the horizon. This is doubly true in the art world, in which the excitement over what is yet to come in the “Asian Century” is palpable. But the allure of the future should not blind us to the necessity of the past. For the past too has to be constructed. Without it we have an unhinged, free-floating, “contemporary”, of a kind that is no longer acceptable on its own – not even at art fairs with their new “Modern Masters” or “Back to the Future” sections.

Museum collections may indeed be “cultural memory” as the Van Abbemuseum's website reminds us, but remembering is a creative act. Collective memories are shaped collectively. Museums are one such machine for collective memory creation. Academic institutions, through their production of art

and other histories, are another. But in Asia, both museums and the academy are, as we have discussed, generally weak institutions and often controlled by nationalist agendas.

History is politics. And in a postcolonial, post Cold War, post Cultural Revolution, context, the past is particularly fraught terrain. But to prevent history from becoming propaganda there is the need for contesting its narratives – for creating “histories” to replace a singular “history”.

Archives, through assembling primary material and making it available, enable new narratives to be written, and existing narratives to be improved, challenged or overturned.

This need for, and appreciation of, archives is not some blinding new insight. Archives are de rigueur in the art world, as the briefest of surveys of major international exhibitions will readily confirm. What could be called an archival practice is the dominant artistic and curatorial form in that part of the art world that thinks of itself as critical. But the creative output of artists shaped by the seductive aesthetics of the archive, or the discursive possibilities of the archive as a curatorial strategy, are not what we are interested in here. It is not the form of the archive that we are looking for, but its function.

The latest issue of *Ibraaz*, the online journal devoted to visual culture in North Africa and the Middle East, in fact addresses this same issue. It asks a number of cultural practitioners both in and outside the region about what role the archive can play in “developing and sustaining a critical and culturally located art history”?

It is an echo of the same call made three years earlier at the conference *Speak, memory* organized by Cairo’s Townhouse Gallery, and suggests that the collective appeal of those who gathered in the Egyptian capital in 2010, for a collaboration between institutions and arts practitioners (artists, writers, curators, researchers, archivists) to enable the “creation of a multiplicity of narratives” has yet to bear fruit – or is not doing so with the urgency, seriousness and breadth that those conference attendees were expecting.

The art historian, and Consulting Director of Research to Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Dr Nada Shabout, seems to share these concerns, and in her contribution to *Ibraaz*, laments: “One of the main problems with modernity in the Arab world is the lack of credibility,



Library interior of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands

criticality and scrutiny in understanding, presenting, and evaluating its nature and objects. A major contributor to this problematic is the lack of archives to facilitate an understanding of its evolution, which thus necessarily distorts the construction of its historical context.”

Shabout sees the problem, at least partially, as artists using archives to produce “beautiful objects” that “displace the archive” through their interventions, and hence challenging the nature and role of documentation. But in my conversations with two researchers focused on the histories of 20th century Arab art – one based in the region and one outside (neither of whom wished to be named) – a much more mundane and everyday variety of institutional



“Without circulation, new narratives are not born and do not accumulate to achieve what Michel Foucault memorably called the ‘density of discursive practices’”

malaise seemed to be in operation: a self-reinforcing pattern based on the lowly status of long-term archival development and research, leading to low levels of budgetary support, resulting in the inability to attract more energetic minds to fight for the cause – a chronic cycle of quiet underachievement.

How does one turn this around? What percentage of Saadiyat Island’s construction budget, or the Qatar Museum Authority’s annual acquisition budget, could address this state of affairs? Or given the skills shortages discussed earlier, is that even the right question?

RETRIEVING THE BOTANICAL RHIZOME

Long before the French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari invested the rhizome with philosophical intent (in their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* project, 1972–80), it existed as a humble botanical term. Rhizomes are horizontal, usually

Consulting Director of Research to Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Dr Nada Shabout

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underground, stems of plants that send out roots and shoots from their nodes. (I recall ginger from science classes at school.) If rhizomes are separated into pieces, each piece may be able to give rise to a new plant. It is this resilience that has enabled colonies of poplar trees (the poplars propagate using a rhizome) to be in existence for a million years.

At the AAA, we often describe ourselves as a node within a network. The significance of the network lies in its ability to promote circulation. For without this, new narratives are not born and do not accumulate to achieve what Michel Foucault memorably called the “density of discursive practices”.

Beyond the circulation enabled by a network, what it also allows is the sharing of independently generated content (between different archives), and the co-creation of content (between individuals and institutions of all shapes and sizes). For a recent project digitizing the archives of an artist-run space in Vietnam, we worked with a project researcher in Ho Chi Minh City supervised by an academic in Chicago. Another example is that of a video archive of performance art over the last 20 years in Malaysia and Singapore being annotated and enriched by two PhD candidates, one in Hong Kong and one in Sydney, under the supervision of the archive donor himself, an American academic now based in Finland.

It is an internet-enabled platform that makes such collaborations possible. And through making primary material available in digital form for free on the web, the Archive intervenes in the economics of doing academic research; easing the burden on young scholars who often have to buy their way out of teaching commitments, and fund long and expensive trips to do field work. The ability to do field work in their living rooms, at least for part of their research needs, means that we can intervene in not just the economics of primary research, but also in its geography.

It is only through such collaborations and long-range exchanges that we can combat the lacks we face around knowledge infrastructure all across Asia – from the Gulf to the South China Sea – and connect our modest individual achievements to amplify their impact. Once we can adopt the botanical rhizome as our roots, we too will have the capacity to grow down into history as well as up into the future. ●