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ART BEYOND THE WEST:

THE ARTS OF AFRICA, INDIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA, CHINA, JAPAN AND KOREA, THE PACIFIC, AND THE AMERICAS

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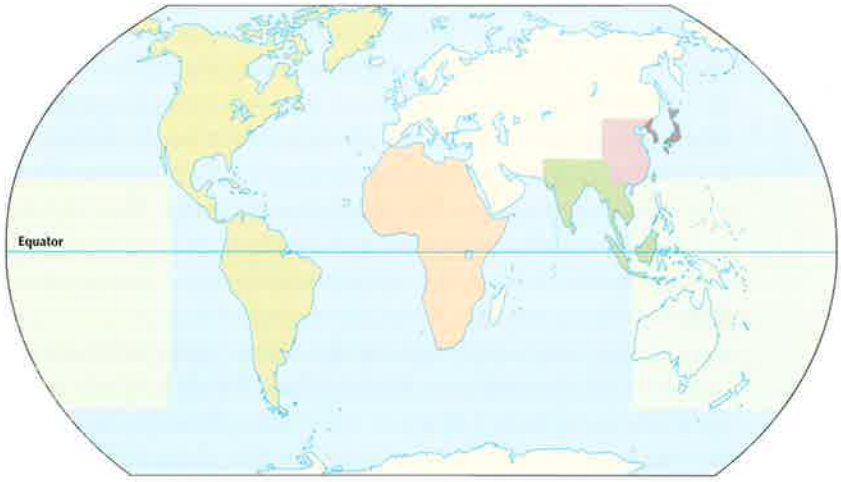
CHAPTER EIGHT

ART WITHOUT BOUNDARIES



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ART WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

INTRODUCTION

Chapters Two through Seven of this book focus on specific times and places where important cultural ideals have been given form in spectacular works of art. These key monuments in the history of art derive from changing networks of thought that are constantly dissolving into new and innovative configurations. This process of change, resulting from outside influences and internal developments, has been the norm for centuries in the areas surveyed in this text. However, that process was accelerated when many parts of Africa, the Pacific, and the Americas as well as parts of Asia fell under Western influences and in many cases were subject to colonial rule. While some writers have suggested that the appearance of Western art damaged those traditions, irreparably, it is also possible to look at this development as just another episode in this long history of change. This final chapter looks at varying artistic responses within these areas and traditions to contact with the West and at subsequent artistic developments in light of the complex and overlapping concepts of postcolonialism, postmodernism, and new forms of internationalism.

Postcolonial artists accept both their precolonial and their colonial experiences as bases for their contemporary art and culture. For each different area of the non-Western world, the postcolonial period began at a different time as indigenous groups achieved home rule. In some localities that change has yet to take place and in others under home rule, the full impact of postcolonialism in the arts has yet to be realized. The broad-based concept of postmodernism, (literally, "after modernism") emerged as a major intellectual and cultural trend around 1970, and continues to be influential throughout the world. This final chapter looks at examples of recent work in some of the areas surveyed in this book to see how contemporary artists there have been influenced by these interlocking concepts of postcolonialism and postmodernism, and how they have helped shape these same concepts as well as the future of art internationally. The story of how certain late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Pablo Picasso expanded their horizons and created exciting works by incorporating non-Western ideals is well known. However, the other side of that story, how non-Western artists of recent decades have been learning from the West and creating works of art that have departed from their ancient cultural traditions and become part of the international world of art is just beginning to be appreciated.

POSTCOLONIALISM

In many parts of the world, the colonial age has come to an end. British rule ended in India in 1947, the post-World War II occupation of Japan concluded in 1952, and with the death of Mao Zedong in 1979, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China was ended. After a thousand years of Chinese domination, Vietnam was part of the French colony called Indo-China (1858–1955), during which it was also occupied by Japan during World War II. Later, the United States involvement there lasted until 1973. As human rights issues assumed new importance in the late twentieth century, many of the colonial governments in Africa and the Pacific gave way to home rule. By the late twentieth century, Native Americans on the government-run reservations in the United States and reserves in Canada also began demanding a greater voice in the way their nations were being managed by predominantly white, absentee government officials.

Home rule and related civil rights movements rekindled interests in traditional forms of art, and the belief that art can still hold its ancient powers. In many parts of the postcolonial world of the late twentieth century, serious efforts were taken to revive traditional forms of art, dance, music, and literature and to establish new art schools, museums, and libraries. As nations become independent, amid the manifold social, economic, and cultural changes taking place under homerule, the arts helped unite diverse ethnic groups under their new national allegiances and values that included an awareness of their involvement with internationalized, Western forms of art and culture. Some individuals responded as antiquarians, reviving and preserving earlier forms of cultural expression for posterity. Others created what became known as "postcolonial" art, new forms of expression that combined the art forms of their ancestors with Western, colonial forms of art to create a synthesis that reflected the inherent duality of their postcolonial world views.

Some writers have used the term "returnee" artist to distinguish certain postcolonial African-American/European artists who have made a pilgrimage—"returned" to Africa, for example—and then went back to the white-dominated Western countries of their birth with a new understanding of how their lives and art reflect both worlds. In many cases, that journey, in which some pilgrims can retrace the route along which their ancestors were transported to the Americas as slaves, has given "returnees" a new sense of closure and identity. Sokari Douglas Camp (born 1958), a London-based sculptor who studied at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland and the Royal College of Art in London, returns periodically to the Kalabari city of Buguma in the Niger River delta region of Nigeria, where she was born. Douglas Camp is just one of many Nigerian artists who have built careers and attracted critical attention in metropolitan art centers in the West since 1990 while maintaining close ties with Nigeria.

To become an artist, she had to overcome a series of obstacles. "The word 'art' and being an artist are things that have to do with the West," says Douglas Camp. "I'd say an artist in Kalabari culture—if there is such a thing—would be someone who deals with power objects." Although, as a young girl, Douglas Camp was not allowed near these power objects in her own community, she watched many masquerade performances and considers her work to be a kind of dance-performance choreography. At times, the themes in her recent work have curators in ethnographic and historical museums rather than art dealers and gallery owners. Her exhibition *Spirits in Steel: The Art of the Kalabari Masquerade* was initially commissioned by the British Museum in London and then traveled to a number of anthropological museums including the American Museum of Natural History in New York (FIG. 8.1). The figures illustrate and dramatize the importance of the rituals associated with some of the works in the museums' collections, and are meant to be seen from all sides, so viewers can walk around them. They draw their inspiration and strength from several traditional Kalabari themes, such as the mystic connection of the spirit and human worlds, and

8.1 Sokari Douglas Camp, *Spirits in Steel: The Art of the Kalabari Masquerade.* 1998–9. Life-size, mixed media installation at the American Museum of Natural History, New York

from the original context of Kalabari art in the performances that continue to this day. These and other sculptures by Douglas Camp have a sense of lively and graceful movement, and mix specific iconographic elements associated with the Kalabari masquerade with abstract forms and a wide variety of colorful, textured materials.

POSTMODERNISM

Before the late twentieth century, many potential patrons might have rejected works of art by non-Western artists that openly displayed Western influences, preferring instead, "pure" works that were not "hybridized." By the end of the twentieth century, however, Western attitudes toward this kind of artistic and cultural "purity" were changing. The movement known as postmodernism had a decentering effect that helped artists, historians, and other thinkers to "decolonize" art history and take a fresh look at art around the world. Postmodernism is a comprehensive worldview that embraces, variety, discontinuity, disjunction, and flux. It questions the meaning of some of the key modernist ideas that were dominant from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, such as "originality" and "creativity." Why did modernism privilege certain artists in a relatively few Western metropolitan centers and call their work "high" or "fine" art at the expense of other traditions and media, which it called "crafts," "decorative arts," and "applied arts"? Postmodernism, the antithesis of modernism, developed as the late twentieth century Western thinkers became more international in their thinking and gave greater respect to cultures outside the Western "mainstream" of thought. The linked ideas of postcolonialism and postmodernism are central to the cultural context in which contemporary art and architecture are developing in many areas beyond the West. Many of the most remarkable artworks of the late twentieth century drew freely on both Western and non-Western traditions, without "privileging" either one or the other.

Perhaps no single monument better expresses this approach in an architectural context than the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia (FIG. 8.2). Some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European architects working in India and neighboring countries had looked for ways to combine elements of the local traditions with the Euro-

pean styles of building in which they had been trained. Often, however, because Europe was the technologically superior culture, its architecture became a symbol of this superiority, while local traditions did not enjoy anything like the same prestige. Over the centuries Malaysia has been ruled by Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus, as well as by the Portuguese and the British. When the Petronas Company, which searches for and produces oil and gas, decided to build their new headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, they wanted a structure that would reflect their diverse cultural background of Malaysia as well as its emerging role in the world economy. Thus, they could not build another modernist International Style steel and glass "box." The Petronas Company wanted an architectural firm with state-of-the-art engineering technology that would also work with local designers to give their new building a distinctive Malaysian look. They found such a firm in Cesar Pelli and Associates of the United States. The Argentina-born Pelli, who had worked on large structures around the world, was well known for his ability to integrate his buildings with the lives and cultures of those who used them. In the end, the architectural firm and local designers created the world's tallest skyscraper (1,483 feet; 452 meters), a pair of towers that reflect the long tradition of Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu thought in Malaysia.

8.2 Cesar Pelli and Associates, Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. 1997

The cross sections of the towers are based on an Islamic decorative motif, a star formed by superimposed squares with semicircular insets between the corners of the squares. Above the two-story sky bridge connecting the towers, the diameter of the towers diminishes through a series of small setbacks. While similar setbacks were used on such classic American examples of the skyscraper as the Empire State Building, the specific way the setbacks of the Petronas Towers increase in frequency toward the top of the structure gives the towers a tapered look that resembles the shapes of earlier Buddhist temple towers in Malaysia and such well-known Hindu temples as those at Khajuraho (see FIG. 3.31) and Angkor Wat (see FIG. 3.37). The interior of the Petronas Towers, which includes a mosque, is decorated with a wide variety of Islamic motifs. While the Towers may share a certain general features with many Western, postmodern buildings, the specific mix of cultural elements in their conception gives it a distinctive regional character unlike works by Pelli and other Western architects working for Western patrons.

The Towers are part of Malaysia's "Vision 2020," a program to rebuild the business district of the capital and become a fully industrialized nation by 2020. With its high pinnacles, the Towers have in fact become the most recognizable symbols of Malaysia's emerging economy. Along with similarly large and expensive skyscrapers in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Seoul, the Towers challenge the longstanding identification of the skyscraper with the United States and Europe, and with temperate climates, and they refute the idea that only Western economies have the means to build and support such tall and expensive structures.

INTERNATIONALISM IN THE POSTMODERN AND POSTCOLONIAL WORLD

As Western art viewers began to take a fresh look at non-Western art and culture, many of the old stereotypes about that "other" world and its art began to change. Even as such highly problematic terms as "primitive" and "tribal" were giving way to the slightly less objectionable terms such as "Third World" or "developing nations," many people still assumed that the arts of Native America, the Pacific, and Africa were inextricably tied to certain ancient ethnic and religious traditions, as manifest in village and regional ceremonials. Likewise, Asian art remained linked with the integrated religious societies that produced the monuments there before the arrival of Western influences. From this perspective, the arts in these non-Western cultures could not exist without these traditional contexts and would be incapable of sustaining their vitality if mixed with Western notions of art. This view allows no room for the rise of creative individuals who depart from traditional modes of representation to create works of art that engage with the world around them in new ways. This closed and static image of culture also prohibits artists from being inspired by art and culture from outside their immediate environment. Outside knowledge, especially Western, becomes a kind of pollution that compromises the "purity" of the art and its frameworks of thought.

To discuss contemporary non-Western art, it is essential to brush aside such outdated notions about its societies and define what is meant and understood as art in these areas today. We must first recognize that many of the ancient traditions in the arts survived colonialism and that they have an important and sustained impact on the lives of the people around them to this day. As a dialogue between the past and present, art continues to be produced in the spirit of the pre-contact works that recognized the need to balance the past and the present—tradition and innovation. These vital, living traditions have inspired a large number of contemporary artists, some of whom have studied internationalized forms of Western art and incorporated elements of it in their work.

Artists whose art fuse the past and present, the traditional and the transcultural have helped us define a broader, emerging conception of internationalism without a "Western" prefix. In recent years, the term "internationalism" has taken on new and more diverse dimensions. The late modernist International Style in architecture that spread around the world was a North American and European export that retained its Western character everywhere it went. It was international in its distribution, but purely Western in its character and construction. The technical superiority of the West allowed it to retain this sort of dominance in international relationships as it spread around the globe. In the postcolonial, postmodern world of thought, the role of thinking from beyond the West is being given an increased role in this traditionally uneven field of thought. However, for this to happen, and to continue, thinkers have had to revise many of their attitudes toward non-Western artists and art traditions.

During the thaw following the death of Mao Zedong in 1979 known as the Peking Spring, foreign capital began coming into China and the slowly began to adopt a more liberal approach, economically and cuturally. While the government continued to support highly politicized and official forms of art, exhibitions by the Stars group in 1979 and 1980 and the 85 New Wave movement in the late 1980s marked the rise of a new Chinese avant-garde. Many of these radicals and dissidents had international perspectives on art and were looking for highly innovative and expressive ways to comment on the China of the 1980s. The government made periodic crackdowns on artists who overtly criticized the Communist Party, such as those involved with the controversial *China/ Avant-garde* exhibitions, which were linked with the infamous June 4th Movement in 1989. Such censorship, however, did not suppress the avant-garde, and interest in experimental art in China continued to rise.

8.3 Wenda Gu, *United Nations—China Monument: Temple of Heaven*. 1998. A site specific installation commissioned by the Asia Society for the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York. Temple made of human hair, Ming dynasty furniture, TV monitors, and video film. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art

Some artists managed to avoid government censorship by using traditional features of Chinese art and culture—its literary tradition and calligraphy, for example—in new contexts , such as installations and performance pieces. One of the most inventive of these artists, Wenda Gu (born 1955), from Shanghai, had been trained in the traditional techniques of Chinese ink painting at the China National Academy of Fine Arts, where he graduated in 1981. Even while he was at the academy, he began looking for new and expressive ways to use the traditional forms of Chinese painting and calligraphy. After a work using mutilated Chinese characters was censored in 1987, Wenda moved to New York City. In such pieces as *United Nations—China Monument: Temple of Heaven*, the artist has enlarged the traditional scale of the Chinese ink painting and calligraphy to create a large-scale installation (FIG. 8.3). Wenda Gu's installations do more than cover portions of a wall, like framed paintings, or rest on pedestals, like sculptures; they take over the architectural spaces they occupy. Visitors could become temporary parts of this installation by sitting and drinking tea on the Ming-style chairs which encircle the television sets.

With large curtains on the walls and suspended from the ceiling, the space vaguely resembles a tent, temple, or tomb. It would be natural to suspect that the calligraphy will explain the meaning of this unusual structure, but Wenda's work is filled with many ironic twists. The curtains, which look like large sheets of Chinese rice paper, are made from human hair and the scripts, which resemble Chinese, English, Hindu, and Arabic forms of writing, are in fact illegible nonsense letters and characters. Many of the Chinese characters are in the ancient seal-script, which cannot be read by the modern Chinese public and give the writings an additional obscure and mystical character. The bogus nature of the "rice" paper, along with the tension between the size of the large, bold black characters, which are presented with such directness on a light background, and the cryptic nature of their content can give rise to many meanings. By violating the traditional system of writing in which the

characters carry distinct meanings, Wenda's work seems to represent a new form of mysticism—with his installations as the temples where the mysteries can be contemplated.

Knowing that the text does not carry readable literary messages, audiences may also ask if the artist is suggesting that the past, especially the Chinese literary tradition that conveyed its cultural values, has no meaning in the present? Is the artist mocking the ancient texts of China, and by implication, those of modern China as well, especially the words of Mao? With the longest, unbroken literary tradition in the world, the Chinese understand the mixed blessings of writing; it can carry valuable knowledge, or be used as an instrument by propagandists to mystify and confuse the populace. While the Communist Party used the slogan *pochu mixin* ("to destroy superstition"), they themselves created a new form of mysticism that reached its height during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s. Are the script and installation the artist's metaphor for modern China or the contemporary Chinese artist whom the rest of the world must struggle to understand? Or, is the artist attempting to reinvent China in terms of its much-loved art forms, ink painting and calligraphy, to make its art part of the international art world?

Wenda Gu, who maintains studios in New York City and Shanghai, says his work embodies the "humor of cultural exchange." The hair, his signature material, used in the paper and writings, may be a clue to his intentions. It comes from more than 325 barbershops in many countries and is as international as the scripts, the television sets in his installation, and the concept of the *United Nations*. This installation can be seen as a kind of universal tea house (those participating in the traditional Japanese tea ceremony underwent a subtle form of bonding), a place where many cultures can assemble and transcend their national differences. In fact, hundreds of thousands of people from around the world have visited Wenga Gu's installations in many countries and shared in this experience. It is an intense, ongoing dialogue, not simply between Wenda Gu's native China and the West, but among many contemporary cultures.

At the end of the twentieth century, the debate between the traditionalists and avant-garde or experimental artists in China continued, with the growing realization that Chinese art is destined to be more than a voice of the government; it is becoming part of an international language of form and communication and is destined to become a voice for more than a billion Chinese.

INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: THE FUTURE OF ART BEYOND THE WEST

An overview of just three of the thousands of artworks produced in the world beyond the West in recent years indicates how clearly the traditional cultural boundaries separating the linguistic, ethnic, and religious groups that produced the great styles of art featured in this book have broken down in the postcolonial and postmodern world and become part of a new, emerging internationalism in the arts. The traditional cultural distinctions and parameters have disappeared in a global world of art without boundaries. Artists are able to draw strength and inspiration from any and every source of ideas and forms they find around the world. Given the richness and multiplicity of these sources, what can one predict for the future of art in the non-Western world?

AFTERWORD

THE NEW GEOGRAPHIES OF CONTEMPORARY ART

What do the terms Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas mean now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the start of a new millennium? How do they help us think about the arts, to understand the new forms and practices that constantly emerge as well as the continual evolution of traditions?

In this moment of looking forward, it is important to remember that these terms have a long history in cultural analysis. When the Greek historian Herodotus famously wrote that "soft lands make soft men," he was expressing the belief that geographic location affects the nature and development of human cultures—distinctive cultures emerge in distinctive geographic places. It is easy to see why this idea has been centrally important in European thought. For thousands of years, cross-cultural contact took place in spite of the enormous barriers that existed between the major land masses. We may complain about cramped seats or bad food on international flights today, but these are nothing compared to the severe privations suffered by those who undertook long-distance travel in the past—whether Polynesians on their way to settle new islands, Islamic traders guiding their caravans along the Silk Road or across the Sahara, or European explorers searching for new routes to gold and spices. The distance and the cultural difference between continents were once measured by time and hardship in ways that are almost unimaginable now. And the kinds of cross-cultural exchanges, the formal and intellectual borrowings and influences that have characterized a variety of art traditions in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, the Americas —and Europe, for that matter—were hard won (see FIG. 2.28).

Of course, continents and geographically specific cultures do still exist, and a geographic framework can be a useful and important way of understanding art traditions, as this book has demonstrated. However, it is worth asking what importance we should give to the concept of continents in analyzing contemporary and future trends in the arts. How do new technologies of travel and communication, from the jumbo jet to the worldwide web, affect the practice, and the interpretation, of art today? How do we define and characterize cultural difference and cultural distance when it is possible to travel from Los Angeles to Tahiti (once the paradigmatic exotic, distant island) in just over seven hours, and to ring Zimbabwe from Japan in an instant? Do continents still represent the kind of cultural separation they once did, when artists such as Sokari Douglas Camp can move easily between Nigeria and Britain—both physically and artistically? How cut off is even a relatively closed country such as China, when the protestors of Tiananmen Square were able to fax their message to the world, and when artists, in spite of censorship, have access to American and European art magazines and, like Wenda Gu, travel abroad to work?

This is not to say that local cultures have disappeared, or that localized art traditions, including some of those traditions described in this book, have disappeared. Cell phones may be ubiquitous in Paris, Cape Town, Mombei, and Mexico City, but nearly half the world's population has never used a telephone, much less carried one around. In the arts local traditions do certainly exist—they flourish—but in some senses perhaps they are more permeable now than ever before, less absolutely local. Books, magazines, television, and radio have widespread distribution, bringing with them new images, ideas, ways of seeing. A global popular culture is emerging that has a long reach, and it is constantly appropriating and disseminating imagery. And the movement is certainly not always from international to local culture. There are a number of forces at work that constantly serve to shift art from the local to the global—whether it is the corporate marketer looking for a cheap source of decorative objects, the ambitious village artist heading to the nearest city, the curator or dealer developing an exhibition or collection, or the art historian or anthropologist looking for insight into human culture.

Sometimes it is the very conditions of the contemporary world that renew and strengthen local cultures and artistic practices. Certainly some of the art traditions described in this book have been challenged by the pressure of shifting populations, changing beliefs, and hostile power regimes. Just think, for example, of the profound effect that Christian evangelization has had on the arts in Latin America and the Pacific. But other art traditions have been renewed and strengthened. It is partly through the search for national and cultural identity in a postcolonial world, as described in Chapter Eight, that these art traditions have been strengthened. Sometimes it is the very hallmarks of the contemporary world that foster and reinforce these kinds of local art practices. One tragic example of this is the AIDS crisis in Africa, an epidemic that has been fostered by transcontinental travel and inadequate health care and health education in many areas. In certain parts of Africa, where the HIV infection rate is as high as fifty percent, people attribute the disease to witchcraft. The virus may be the proximate cause of the disease, but it is a witch's malevolence toward an individual that makes the person vulnerable to the virus. In the context of this belief, traditional healing rituals and performances, with their associated art forms, have actually been strengthened.

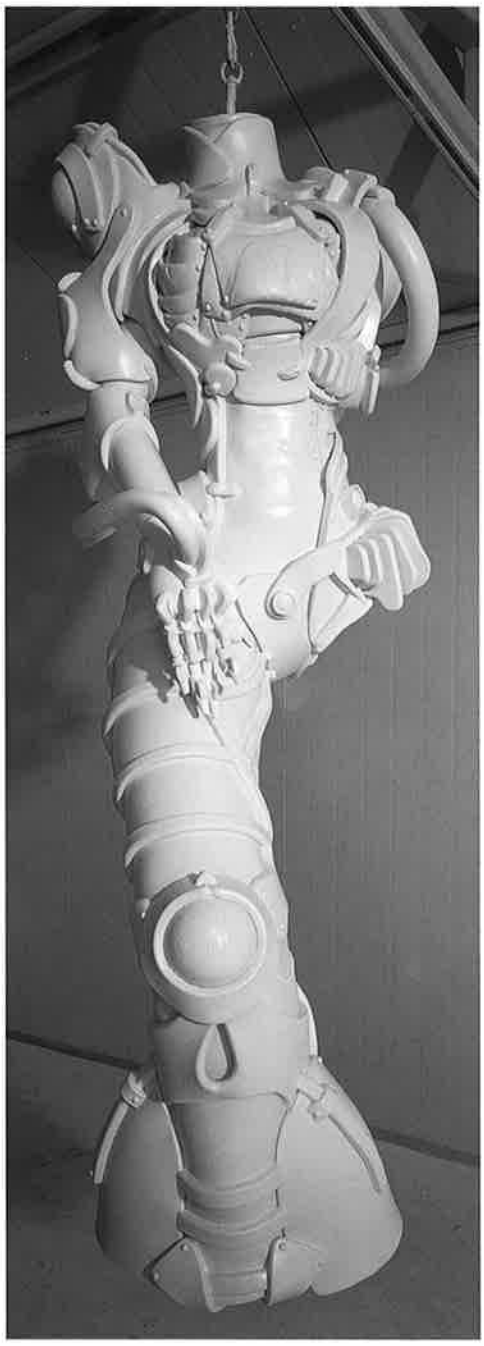
8.4 Pacific Sisters, performance at the Seventh Pacific Festival of Art, Western Samoa. 1996

In the new geography of contemporary art, our analysis must be built on concepts that allow us to move fluidly between the local/regional/national/international/continental, for artists themselves move fluidly between places, artistic practices, and visual vocabularies. So we should give less emphasis to the concept of continents, with their connotations of distance and fixity, and substitute concepts of mobility, communication, and hybridity as key elements of our interpretive framework. To develop this analysis, I want to discuss three emerging artists whose works—as varied and distinctive as they are—develop from this new kind of mobility and exchange of ideas. Their work grows out of both localized cultural practices and international art practice, and their intended audiences are similarly both local and international. These are artists who do not observe any of the traditional boundaries, whether geographic, cultural, or artistic.

Pacific Sisters, a performance group based in Auckland, New Zealand, exemplify the kind of hybrid practice that characterizes much contemporary art. This group challenges just about every standard category that might normally be used to classify them. It includes studio artists, film makers, graphic artists, and fashion designers who are all of Pacific islands descent but who grew up and live in the Pacific diaspora communities of Auckland. Their complex multimedia performances incorporate film and still

imagery, costume, dance, and music. In this way, they simultaneously participate in the performance art practices of the contemporary international art world—a member once likened the group to "a Polynesian version of Andy Warhol's Factory"—and are true to the performance art traditions that are so centrally important to Pacific ssland cultures. Their costumes exemplify these juxtapositions, for they incorporate barkcloth and raffia, lycra and polyester, glass beads, feathers, and shells. In these dramatic costumes and with their aggressive, powerful performance style, Pacific Sisters challenges the saccharine image of the South Seas dancing girl, a mainstay of pop culture representations of the Pacific for over a hundred years.

Unlike Warhol's Factory, the members of Pacific Sisters has a serious interest in reconnecting with tradition and they frequently perform new versions of Polynesian legends and stories. Pacific Sisters recently traveled to Samoa to participate in the Pacific Arts Festival, a traditionally oriented celebration of song, dance, and the visual arts that attracts artists from all over the Pacific. While there, one of the Samoan members of the group participated in a ceremony in her family's native village, because she by birth was the *taupou*, the sacred maiden of the village (FIG. 8.4). But she performed the ceremony in her own way—in her Pacific Sisters costume, accompanied by all her Pacific Sisters. Although she certainly dressed and behaved differently from the traditional *taupou*, many members of the village expressed satisfaction at her performance, both because she was fulfilling a traditional obligation and because she brought something new to the role of *taupou*.



8.5 Lee Bul, *Cyborg*. 1999. Aluminum wire, stainless steel, polyethylene resine, polyurethane sheet, 59 x 21½ x 53½" (150 x 55 x 90 cm). Kukje Gallery, Seoul, Korea

Lee Bul from Seoul, South Korea, is another artist who explores the representation of women and the construction of femininity in global culture. Her work is oriented toward an international public and utilizes an international visual vocabulary and intellectual framework, and yet emerges very much from her experience growing up in a major East Asian city as the daughter of dissident parents. Her work simultaneously engages in a critique both of Western patriarchy and of the specific forms of patriarchy encouraged by Korean Confucianism, which is still used to silence women and uphold male authority in contemporary Korean society.

Lee's 1993 installation *Majestic Splendor*, exemplifies this doubly directed critique. In this work, she presented plastic bags containing fish beautifully decorated with beads and sequins in an obvious reference to feminine adornment. Strange and lovely as they are, the fish soon begin decompose: their feminine ornamentation is powerless to prevent them from decay and putrefaction. In a Korean context, the feminist critique contained within the work emerges even more strongly. This particular species of fish has feminine connotations—it is a *domi*, a type of red snapper typically found in local markets, which calls to mind women's domestic responsibilities in cooking and caring for their families. Moreover, the word *domi* refer to the legend of Lady Domi, who committed suicide to evade the seductions of a king and remain loyal to her true love. Lee's work calls into question the value of both constructions of femininity and female experience, the quotidian and the mythic.

Among Lee's most recent work is a series of female cyborgs, enormous sculptures depicting the human-machine hybrids that are the stuff of both science fiction and contemporary cultural theory (FIG. 8.5). Lee's cyborgs are simultaneously hyper-mechanical and hyper-feminine: the mechanical articulation of their hard, contoured surfaces contrasts with their nipped waists, curvy hips, and full breasts. Lee notes that what interests her in the pop culture cyborg imagery, of the type found in Japanese animations and comics that have achieved worldwide popularity, is "a superhuman power, the cult of technology, and

8.6 Yinka Shonibare, *Victorian Couple.* 1999. Wax printed cotton textile, approx. 60 × 36 × 36" (153 × 92 × 92 cm); approx. 60 × 24 × 24" (153 × 61 × 61 cm). Collection of Susan and Lewis Manilow, Chicago

girlish vulnerability working in ambiguous concert." Despite their remarkable aura of power and strength, these cyborgs are fragmentary and mutilated, missing heads and limbs. They dangle helpless and useless from the ceiling, calling into question both the myth of technological perfection and the idea that women could find such cyborg imagery empowering. Lee's cyborgs remind us that futuristic fantasies are often based on regressive gender practices.

Yinka Shonibare's work emerges—like that of the Pacific Sisters—from his diasporic background. Shonibare was born in London to Nigerian parents, raised in Nigeria and trained at art school in London. Based now in London, he gained international attention in the mid-1990s with a series of photographs that critiques the power relationships of the colonial past and exposes the absurdity and racism of historical nostalgia. *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* creates elaborate tableaux depicting scenes from the life of an aristocratic gentleman in nineteenth-century England. There is an ironic twist to these images, for the dandy in question is none other than Shonibare himself. The verisilimitude cracks, the illusion is exposed, for we cannot suspend our disbelief so far as to accept this Nigerian man in the role of Victorian gentleman. Racism and colonialism make that subject position impossible.

In the mid-1990s, Shonibare began making works from the kind of colorful, printed fabrics that are worn throughout West Africa. In an amusing and thought-provoking juxtaposition, Shonibare's *Victorian Couple* (FIG. 8.6) presents a very elegant and complete Victorian man and woman's costume made from this fabric. As Shonibare points out, "By making hybrid clothes, I collapse the idea of a European dichotomy against an African one. It becomes difficult to work out where the opposites are. There is no way you can work out the precise nationality of my dresses, because they do not have one. And there is no way you can work out the precise economic status of the people who would've worn those dresses because the economic status and the class status are confused in these objects." Moreover, the piece questions the "Africanness" signalled by these fabrics. The fabrics are actually created by English and Dutch designers, who are themselves inspired by Indonesian batiks. The fabrics are manufactured in Europe and exported to African markets, and then remarketed in the West as something distinctly African. By using such a hybrid and contradictory material, Shonibare refuses any notion of an essential or authentic African identity.

Recently Shonibare has taken this fabric work in two different directions, both more popular and more deeply embedded in art world traditions and practices. He has started making families of space aliens from these textiles, works that he feels are particularly accessible to a larger audience. These aliens play with the notion that Africans "belong" in space as much as anyone else and point out the ways that our fantasies about aliens are still based very much on Euro-American normative values. In a different vein, *100 Years* consists of one hundred square panels covered with this printed fabric and hung in a grid pattern. The grid has been an element of enduring interest in the Minimalist tradition, and by coupling the grid with this cloth—which is anything but minimal and so strongly expressive of African identity in popular culture—Shonibare undermines Minimalism's claims to ideological neutrality and cultural universality. In this way, his work exists in conversation with the work of a number of recent artists, such as Agnes Martin and Sol LeWitt, who have reflected critically and self-consciously on the use of the grid.

Pacific Sisters, Lee Bul, and Yinka Shonibare represent some of the most exciting art being produced today in any context. All of them clearly work from their own particular cultural backgrounds and perspectives but are very much a part of international culture and art. They have a shared interest in critiquing the racism, sexism, and essentialism of international culture: Pacific Sisters, the romanticized notion of the South Seas woman; Lee Bul, the construction of femininity; Yinka Shonibare, the persistent racism inherited from the colonial past and the image of African identity. In doing so, these artists provide us with images that are visually memorable, complex and nuanced, thought-provoking, and sometimes even humorous. In the ways that these artists' concerns intersect, it is clear that none of them is bound or circumscribed by cultural identity or a sense of cultural geography. Their work shows us that to engage fully with contemporary art we do not need to set aside the geographic framework, but we must use other ideas along with it. We, too, must have flexibility of thought and imagination, an ability to move between cultures and ideas, in order to appreciate and understand new images as they emerge.