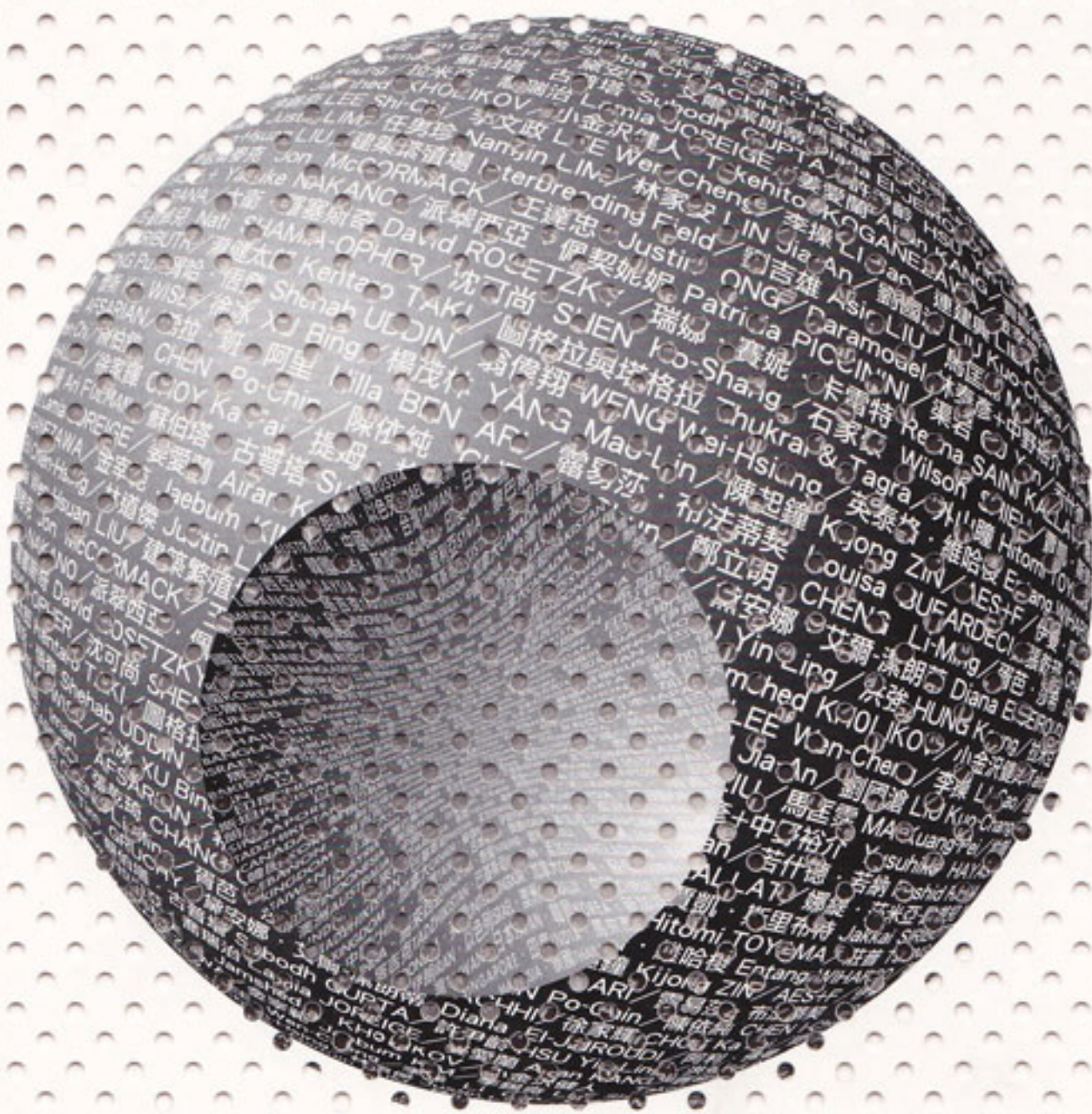


2009 亞洲藝術雙年展

Asian Art Biennial

觀點與「觀」點

Viewpoints & Viewing points



目次 Contents

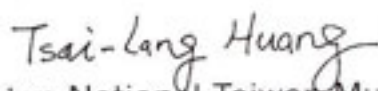
- 04 主委序 Minister's Foreword
行政院文化建設委員會主任委員 黃碧端
Dr. Pi-Twan HUANG
Minister, Council for Cultural Affairs, Taiwan
- 06 館長序 Director's Foreword
國立台灣美術館館長 黃才郎
Tsai-Lang HUANG
Director, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts
- 09 策展專文 Curatorial Essay
拆解「觀點」與「觀」點
Deconstructing "Viewpoints" and "Viewing Points"
2009亞洲藝術雙年展策展人 蔡昭儀
Chao-Yi TSAI
Curator of 2009 Asian Art Biennial
- 25 參展藝術家作品介紹與圖版
Artist's Statements and Plates
- 213 藝術家簡歷
Artists' Biographies
- 254 展出作品清單
List of Exhibited Works
- 277 感謝誌
Acknowledgements

Director's Foreword

In recent years, the development potential of Asia's economy and international trade has become a talking point in the world, while various cultural viewpoints and discussions of aesthetic forms concerning the Asian phenomenon have become a hip trend. With the expression and exploration of diverse viewpoints, the unique and sometimes conflicting Asian contemporary art has evolved a meaningful vocabulary with multifarious forms. Under the influence of an ever-changing culture, Asian artists also achieve increasingly dramatic breakthroughs.

As a platform of exchange between Taiwan and the international art world, the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts introduces the rich contemporary art forms and cutting-edge viewpoints and discourses to the local audience by organizing large-scale biennials. In 2007, adopting the salutation "Have you eaten yet?" as its theme, the *Asian Art Biennial* opened up the opportunity for interaction and sharing between art and artists from the Asia-Pacific region. In 2009, it concentrates on the dialogue and interaction between "viewpoints" and "viewing points", and explores how the present interweaving viewpoints deepen and evolve into the Asian condition. With the constantly changing and separately developing social trends in different regions, these viewpoints with multiple implications and the cultural reality behind them enrich the cultural dimension of the so-called "Asian perspectives".

Viewpoints and Viewing Points – the 2009 Asian Art Biennial features 56 artists/artist groups and film directors from 20 Asia-Pacific countries. Through 144 dazzling works of painting, installation art, sculpture, digital art, animation and documentary, they convey their own views about contemporary society and culture. With the biennial's open platform, we hope to stimulate dialogue, discussion and exchange of values by bringing together the viewpoints bred in different cultural contexts. This will in turn enable the audience to view the ambiguities and conflicts in contemporary society from more diverse angles and perspectives.

 Tsai-Lang HUANG
Director, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts

Deconstructing “Viewpoints” and “Viewing Points”

By **Chao-yi Tsai** (*Curator of 2009 Asian Art Biennial*)

Throughout civilization, human beings have had many different views about the planet on which they live. After thousands of years of observation, speculation and research, the world was proven to be round when the fleet of Fernando Magellan (1480-1521) circumnavigated the earth by sailing westward from Spain. Today, we all believe the earth is round, not only because of scientific proof, but also because it is a generally accepted fact and truth, even though most of us have not seen it with our own eyes. On the other hand, in the present age of advanced communications and widely available technology, more and more people are suggesting that “the world is flat”.¹ Due to the ease of Internet access, information and media content can now be disseminated at an unprecedented speed. Through the electronic media, distance, boundaries and time difference are eliminated. People living in different parts of the world can co-operate or compete on the grounds of equality of information. As a result, the world is not only flat, it has been transformed from a physical presence in three-dimensional space into an invisible, intangible and yet ubiquitous abstract electronic interface.

“The world is round” vs. “the world is flat”—from physical space to virtual space, these two concepts reveal the differences between the historical moments from which they emerged. Standing on diverse theoretical grounds, they serve different ideologies, and are linked to totally divergent technological, cultural and social structures and imagination. While seeking meaning and answers on equally credible but competing foundations, these two incompatible concepts (or “viewpoints”) intersect on a certain level – i.e. they point at the unstoppable trend and inevitable fate of the interconnectivity of the world – despite their contrasting approaches, perspectives and modes of interpretation. But maybe because viewpoints and interpretations do not have to follow a single logic or fixed tracks, many divergent views and arguments can freely flow, connect, coexist or meet, and open up a future for us that contains more than just one possibility.

It is equally hard to describe Asian contemporary art from a single viewpoint or in a simplified manner. In recent years, various cultural interpretations and discussions of aesthetic meaning concerning the Asian phenomenon have gradually become one of the main focuses of observing the global contemporary art trends. This highlights the unique visual expressions shaped by the diverse historical contexts, cultural traditions, religious beliefs and social realities in different parts of Asia. However, unable to exclude itself from the tide of globalization, Asia continues to open itself to new traditions, to new ways of seeing the world and to cultural experiences. Thus, contemporary Asian art is manifesting a continuous state of development.

¹ In 2005, *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman published *The World is Flat*, suggesting that the world today has been flattened by the Internet. With broadband and internet search engines, people around the world have equal opportunities of obtaining information, and can now compete on an equal footing. This development will have an effect on the international economic trends.

Viewpoints and Viewing Points: Mutually Comparing and Influencing

Using “viewpoints” and “viewing points” as a comparative framework and mutually influencing variables, the *2009 Asian Art Biennial* wants first of all to bring the focus of the exhibition back to the creative expression and visuality of the works, and to establish a practical mode of thinking about and studying contemporary Asian art. Rhetorically speaking, “viewpoints” and “viewing points” are both neutral terms. While they are not academic terms, they are indispensable in talking about art. As independent terms, they can be used in any kind of research and knowledge theory. But once there is a specific topic or discussion, they can be applied to different phenomena or discourse, and create a certain dialectic in relative relations. Thus, the dialogue between “viewpoints” and “viewing points” constitutes an open platform. Through the thinking, observation, imagination or critique of artists based on different grounds, we can reexamine and learn from the structures and realities of Asian contemporary life. In addition, we can probe into how certain conditions present in Asia today came about and evolved, and which of these conditions have shaped our way of seeing things and assigning meaning. We explore questions such as what lies under the surface, how meaning emerges from objects, and why it emerges, who is looking and how to look. What are the connections between what we “see” and what we “believe”, and why do those connections exist? Further, how have the interconnections, symbiosis, complementary nature and mutual clarification and elucidation between “viewpoints” and “viewing points”, and the ambiguities, misreading, oppositions, and myths therein shaped today’s world? How do they produce the contemporary state of being? And how do these viewpoints with multiple implications and the cultural reality behind them strengthen the special position of the so-called “Asian perspectives” in a both unified and divided contemporary reality and society?

Visual art works are expressions of what the artists see and think. However, “what one sees” is never just the reflex action of the optic nerves. Instead, it is closely related to the mode, the attitude and the intention of seeing, as well as past optic experiences of pleasure.² The angle of seeing is always selective. Apart from being the projection of the individual’s consciousness, it also has to do with the ability to understand the images in a certain culture and society and from one’s learning. What is “seen” is not necessarily just images, but also events, experiences, knowledge, imagination, ideas, myth, ideology or prejudice. What can be seen and what is overlooked are often connected with our sense of identity, belief, desire, instinct, fetish and values. Whether one proceeds from “viewpoints” to “viewing points”, or transforms “viewing points” into “viewpoints”, they interact with each other in art and stimulate creativity, mingling with different texts of contemporary culture and society.

² Applying the views of Richard Wollheim, who thinks that the spectator’s attitude, pleasure, experience and intention will affect “seeing”. Wollheim, R. “What the Spectator Sees”, *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*. New York: Harper Collins, 1991, p. 103.

This exhibition highlights the importance of the dialogue and interaction between “viewpoints” and “viewing points” for another reason – contemporary artists are seldom passive observers, but more often active interpreters. They understand that there is no single or correct answer to the problems in the world, and no guarantee of “one” meaning or a “real” meaning. So-called “meaning” is often the result of the cultural imagination of those with power at a certain time and place. “Meaning” is always in flux, changing with the environment, time and interpreter, while the production, circulation, revelation and understanding of meaning may be framed by a certain viewpoint or viewing position. The solution of contemporary artists is to be actively involved in the process of interpretation and decoding meaning. They are deeply aware of the importance of identifying the power relations and visual logic behind the production of the way of seeing and the revelation of meaning, and often deconstruct such power relations and logic with a revelatory or critical stance, even though they themselves may adopt a specific perspective or position. With “viewpoints” and “viewing points”, producers and decoders consciously or unconsciously adopt a two-way, mutually complementary or challenging mode; through different paths, special methods, contemplation of appearances or by providing testimony to highlight hidden values or reveal silent truths and shed light on the predominant culture or myth scrambled in between, they prompt us to have to reflect on the cultural construct and reality of Asian contemporary life, generating other possibilities beyond our existing experience and understanding.

Diversity is Asia’s unique cultural asset. However, if “pluralism” and “diversity” become the conventional or fixed image of Asia, we might be stuck in the imagination of “difference,” which would prevent a deeper reading. Nevertheless, Asia is indeed internally “diverse” and “pluralistic”, with each nationality having a different cultural tradition that outside values may not be able to penetrate. It is equally hard to simplify, and must be approached and understood from its specific context. But the originally autonomous system has been complicated by the interpenetration brought about by globalization, while the decentering, delocalizing and dematerializing virtual world has changed the relationship between real and fictitious, subject and object, and between the individual and society forever. Every time we try to examine the content and meaning of Asian contemporary art, we find ourselves challenged by the variables within it – the meaning is often inconsistent and discontinuous. When the context changes, new values and new interpretations may be produced. It is also hard to clearly classify the viewpoints or viewing points of the works. Signs often carry multiple meanings and are arranged or regrouped in a different way, while seemingly simple themes sometimes have complex imagination and implications.

Since the term “Asia” and the “viewpoints” or “viewing points” of Asian contemporary art have not yet been institutionalized, there are endless possibilities of interpretation. As the representation of its times, art has to constantly update itself as times change. There is no single, self-sufficient method, and the effectiveness of all methods must be verified in the course of creation. How do we “see” the real meaning of art and relate to it? Maybe viewers should follow the artists’ eyes and thoughts and trace their experiences to understand how they reflect on the personal and the social, and what their “viewing points” open up, connect with and exclude. These clues will lead us to the viewpoints of the works, and discover the contemporary reality they try to reveal.

Ways of Seeing

"How we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein."

Hal Foster³

Sight is ranked at the top of man's five senses.⁴ It is also an important foundation for people to explore, construct, assess and understand the outside world. Thus, the eyes are defined as a sensory organ with sociological functions.⁵ Art is often directly associated with "sight", since both are related to "seeing" and "perception", and constitute the means of understanding the world and constructing the subject. As a creative act and means of expression, how does an artwork convey its ideas and meaning? And how does it make viewers connect with it and think about it? We know that colour, texture, material, form, vocabulary and content constitute the basis of a work. But artworks can never be classified as a homogeneous whole. The arrangement of the visual content, the narrative method and mode of operation, the technology of the media and the way of organizing images are variables in the manifestation of a work. Depending on the subject matter, aims and target audience, they will produce different visual installations, causing the viewing subject to examine and reflect on the differences of meaning. Temporal, spatial or cultural differences will also produce diverse ways of seeing and value judgment.

While both "viewpoints" and "viewing points" are related to the "ways of seeing", the latter refers not just to "seeing" with one's eyes, but also encompasses our faculty of understanding, empathy, thinking and judgment, a complex process of using various senses to experience the world and make interpretations. If an artist's standpoint is determined by his or her perception, then the way, method, and from where he or she makes the observation determine his or her interpretation and thus affect the audience's way of seeing. However, ways of seeing are not simply governed by visual techniques, because an artwork not only reflects the artist's own concerns, choices, and values, it affects and influences the meaning and interpretation received by the audience. Therefore, one core issue that artists often focus on is releasing the audience from fixed ways of seeing and imagining through the presentation of the artwork, allowing the act of *viewing* itself become a process of interpretation, and having the viewers to start reflecting upon or critically regard the image or its content.

However, in contemporary life saturated with symbols and imageries, we are facing an unprecedented visual stimulation. The ubiquity of media in the outside world constantly brings us new experiences and rich grounds for imagination, causing us to rely ever more on our visual sense to understand the outside world while it becomes ever more difficult for us to break away from the reality that is represented by the media. It is exactly because we are surrounded by all sorts of visual mediums and products of visual technology that the mundane or reality that used to be apparent everywhere

³ Hal Foster, 'Preface', in Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1988, p. ix.

⁴ Citing the views of American visual culture scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff in *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, London: Routledge, 1999. The five senses are sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch.

⁵ Citing Georg Simmel's definition, "Sociology of Senses," in Mike Featherstone ed. *Simmel on Culture*, 1992, pp. 109-120

has become hidden behind layers of the mediating lenses. Attempting to wake people from the dream of simulated reality, the creative strategy of artists often cuts directly to the core of the issue, deconstructing the production of images and causing the viewers to doubt the realness of their daily lives. Upon close observation, it is easy to discover that many meaningful and inspirational works of contemporary art, whether they be serious or not, all gain their inspiration from everyday life. Artists transform many issues that we see but have overlooked (or purposefully ignored) into a visual medium and create an intricately arranged visual installation with its viewing logic, directing the audience to follow the narrative paths or story leads in order to decipher the various hidden metaphors.

Mirror Images, Cracks, and Multiple Realities

Asia contains within it multitudes of complex cultures, histories, traditions, religious beliefs, and social patterns. Likewise, art has developed into unique and diverse visual forms and creative expressions due to the stirring of various cultural elements. Even with such a diversity of works in contemporary Asian art, a number of common issues can still be found. For example, the issues surrounding personal identity and situation can be explored through history, memory and identification, cross-boundary and cultural intermingling, centrality and marginalization, and dispersion and repatriation. The portrayal of culture, consumption, gender, status under the influence of globalization can be examined through subtopics such as colonialism and immigration, cultural symbols of commercial products, materialism and consumer desires, urban icons, international families, global households, and contemplations on gender, race, the other, imperialism, and surveillance as affected by power and political structure. Furthermore, the series of catastrophic events in recent years have made global ethics a much focused upon issue and channeled much discussions toward the eco-system, terrorism, wars and conflicts, refugee problems, humanitarianism, and the ethical treatment of land. The omnipresence of the “society of spectacle,” created by the media and mass communication technologies, allows topics such as the essence of media imagery, the reality and virtuality of the mediums, the relationship between the self and the other in the internet age, and other derivative issues such as the possibilities and limitations of technology, technology and humanity, and artificial intelligence and machine intelligence to become important topics of observation and interpretation for the artists. The whole of these issues cover almost all the ins and outs of contemporary life.

Artistic creations are able to communicate with audiences due to the artworks’ own visual nature, which has no fixed form of construction and is not conformed by methodology. Artistic insight rarely comes from the deduction of methods but instead relies on the creator’s contemplation of the phenomena of the times. Furthermore, a “successful interpretation” is difficult to define and always differs from person to person. However, this exhibition does not wish only to present the multitudes of reality that is exposed by the differences in viewpoints, nor does it simply attempt to discuss how to, through the use of artistic language, establish a sort of imaginative space or paths of critique for “viewing.” Instead, this exhibition seeks to use the creators’ methods of reading, utilization, exchange, linking, and recreation of visual subjects in order to understand their unique standpoints, perspectives, positions, beliefs, context, skepticism, and interests in viewing

and reevaluating Asia's contemporary cultural landscape and closely related issues. By exploring the existing or dependent meaning framework, we are able to distinguish between the "surface" and the "essence" that was previously taken for granted in the relationship between symbols and power, and further dissect and examine contemporary Asian phenomena.

Our lives continuously and rapidly change with the development of digitalization and globalization, which not only influences the ways in which we communicate with one another and experience the world, but also has resulted in diverse living conditions for the modern human. The phrase "global village" not only signifies a new and changing culture, it also inextricably links our existence, thoughts, and personal experiences with complex technologies, entities, and social and cultural content. Indeed, our lives are becoming more convenient, fast-paced, packed with more variety and more global content. Likewise, interconnected events such as climate abnormalities, natural disasters, pandemic diseases, and financial crises that shake the global economic system are also affecting Asia and the world with increasing speed and intensity. They have posed threats and challenges, either directly or indirectly, to our lives and even altered our views and attitudes toward the world. Many of these events serve as evidence that the world we live in is one whose development and future changes are difficult to predict. Many of our existing beliefs, methods, assumptions, and structures face the challenge of repeated scrutiny and readjustment, and necessitate an open framework of thinking and introspective examination in order to fully observe the volatile conditions of contemporary culture and society.

The various images of contemporary society are marked by their ambiguity. It is impossible to attempt to use only one viewpoint through which to understand the nature or reality of our world, much less to establish that sole viewpoint as absolute and irrefutable. This impossibility is due to the fact that, beneath such images lie the fragments of multiple realities and the interwoven cracks of all people's daily lives and situations. By looking through these cracks, we can observe the various sections of reality, the margins of reality, and their connections with isolated or forgotten truths. Therefore, our viewpoints are never only black or white, but various shades of ambiguous gray that exist between absolute meanings and values. Therein lies our neverending struggle with humanity, psychology, politics, economy, culture and ethics. This exhibition not only focuses on the multiple realities beneath the cracked surface, but also is concerned with the fragmentation of realities in this interwoven existence. Are the chaotic layers nothing but a representation of diversity and differences; or is there a deeper order hidden beyond the chaos? Do issues such as floating historical images without context, common social problems arising from differing social structures, and the mechanisms of regulation and exclusion indicate a collective human condition? Or do they hint that we are strictly ruled by our everyday lives? It is indeed difficult to observe these intricate and mystical qualities under the subtle influence of our ideologies.

Representation of the Real

An artist, as an observer, can never separate himself or herself from the observed object – contemporary life – and is often concerned with issues extending from some previous personal

experience while closely linked with the surrounding culture or location. However, it isn't an artist's job to determine right or wrong, but to provide an in-depth, layered, inductive or deductive analysis of the so called reality based on his or her own perspective, experience, and exploration of issues. In *Representation of the Real*, Edward W. Said expressed, "The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representor. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is eo ipso implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the 'truth,' which is itself a representation."⁶ If we consider the representation of art as an effort by the artist, through observation and understanding, to make the best interpretation of the "facts," then one of the most important and irreplaceable values of art is to point out the bias or the matter-of-fact assumptions of these "facts," to pose questions, and to expose the various problems within. Contemporary Asian artists are currently working in this direction, creating representations of the reality through their personal experiences. The viewing of any exhibition brings to the audience an exchange of experiences and some kind of impact, whether it be big or small. In these experiences, the viewpoints and discussions are received and understood by the audience, which in turn, allows those viewpoints and discussions to continue to spread and regenerate.

In *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin describes the innate human ability of "storytelling" for the purpose of exchanging experiences with each other. It is a power that cannot be taken away and is one of the securest things we have. The storytellers all came from afar, bringing with them experiences completely foreign to our environment. Their stories are filled with personal experiences as well as the collective memories, experiences and moral values of distant lands. Those who listen to the stories are always filled with curiosity, ready to approach and understand that mysterious, unknown and unseen distant place through the stories. But now, the stories have disappeared because the world is changing too fast. The invention of the printing press has replaced stories with novels, separating the storytellers from their audiences. The advance of information technology has further marginalized the art of storytelling because information is so easily attainable and lost that experiences are rendered worthless. The distance between ourselves and the storytellers grows wider and wider and people have stopped listening to stories altogether. The demise of the stories symbolizes the loss of ability to exchange experiences; the art of storytelling is coming to an end...⁷

Yet, does the saturation of information necessarily mean the deficiency of experiences? Immersed in the ever-changing world of technology, people have no choice but to change their way of viewing and the essence of communication. They have learned to live with the abundance of information, interact between the real and the virtual, and more or less, absorbed these techniques into part of

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage, 1979, pp. 272-273.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" (1936), in *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Edited and with Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

our consciousness. In other words, our stories may not be lost or vanished, they just exist within a different method of exchanging experiences. The wise storytellers of our times –contemporary artists – share with us contemporary narratives in unique story forms.

By standing on the shoulders of artists and looking at Asia through different fields of vision, we may understand the complex world of Asia as well as various “far off places.” Perhaps, by first believing in the existence of “far off places” and keeping an open mind and just the right amount of skepticism towards what we see, hear, and perceive, we can learn from our neighbors with a humble heart.

伊曼·阿法薩朗 Iman AFSARIAN

畫家伊曼·阿法薩朗，1975年生於德黑蘭，藝術雜誌《Herfe Honarmand》的編輯之一；這份雜誌專門報導新興的伊朗與國際藝術，也刊登發表理論性的文章。在展出作品《這是我們過去與現在的故事》中，阿法薩朗用一段引人深思的寓言開頭，敘述三個鄉下人想到城裡定居，他們各自運用不同的策略融入新環境，但全都失敗了，因為他們沒有把自身的認同列入考慮。在阿法薩朗的想法中，認同永遠會被主流文化所吞噬；這些主流文化所代表的視線，雖然會在所謂的邊緣地帶游移，卻只會看到那些符合自己價值觀的事物。

作者：伊曼·阿法薩朗。製作：《流沙》當代藝術DVD雜誌。

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Painter Iman Afsarian (born 1975 in Tehran) is co-editor of the art magazine Herfe Honarmand which showcases emerging Iranian and international art and publishes theoretical treatises. Afsarian's thought-provoking statement begins with a parable about three villagers who want to settle in the city. They have different strategies of integration, but all of them fail because they do not take their own identity into account. Identity, according to Afsarian, is always overshadowed by the dominant culture, whose representatives let their gaze wander over the so-called periphery, but the only treasures they discover are those that underpin their own point of view.

Author: Iman Afsarian. Produced by TREIBSAND, DVD Magazine on Contemporary Art.

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He began to observe and study the city.



And they put him on display at the Museum of Anthropology.



Objects exist only when they are seen.
We found our identity in being seen.



The Medicis collected and preserved Renaissance treasures for the world.



伊曼·阿法薩朗，《這是我們過去與現在的故事》

2006，5分28秒錄像，藝術家及Treibsand當代藝術影像雜誌收藏。

Iman AFSARIAN, *This is the story of our past and present*, 2006.
5 minutes 28 seconds, DVD, courtesy of Iman Afsarian &
Treibsand DVD Magazine of Contemporary Art.