

## BOOK REVIEWS

# Why Asia?

## *Essays on Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*

By Alice Yang

NEW YORK: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1998

192 PAGES

71 BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS

Alice Yang retrieves Asian and Asian American art from peripheral discourse and identity politics and places them into the mainstream. She does this while stressing nationality and ethnicity as the significant factors informing works of art and exhibitions. These two goals appear contradictory, yet Yang convincingly argues that they are not. She queries, "How, then, might one think about contemporary Taiwanese art beyond the restrictive categories of the traditional versus the modern, or of the Chinese versus the Western?" (119–120). She answers by constructing a new critical gauge—a tripartite "cultural axis" encompassing high culture, popular culture, and mass culture—which reveals "an art that is both distinctly Taiwanese and distinctly modern" (120). The third and final section, "Critical Essays," is her strongest and best, combining the breadth of her knowledge with her profound understanding of the particular.

In the second section, "Reviews," Yang brilliantly applies her critical method to her discussion of Asian American group exhibitions, but fails to consistently bring this view to her examinations of individual Asian American artists. Yang knows that Asian Americans are not all alike. They have their own disputes within the Asian American community deriving from old and new world histories of racism, culturalism and gender construction, independent of complicated Western relationships, influences, appropriations, and perceptions. Yet she does not effectively incorporate these distinctions into her discourse. Had Yang focused on the art of one Asian American community, she would have avoided this blurring of significant difference.

Though Yang's theoretical argument is sound, the scope of her inquiry is too ambitious. I wish Yang had limited her discussion to China and Chinese Americans or Korea and Korean Americans so the reader could trace issues in the land of origin/descent and their manifestations and transformations in the land of habitation/citizenship. By aiming to include Asia and Asian Americans, she scatters her fire and largely misses her stated target. The first two sections are fragments of this promised larger whole, but she never provides the pattern to weave them together. Indeed, trying to sum up Asia rather than focus on an area is precisely the kind of gaff the West is criticized for. Why does she speak of Asia when she argues for examining the local? Her discussion of Chinese non-official art's "unique social and institutional context . . . in post-Mao China—a context inextricable from China's socialist legacy" was extremely

enlightening (108). It is precisely her penchant to isolate the peculiar that is her critical strength and which she herself undermines. An introduction to the book might have blunted or eliminated these problems.

Throughout the three sections of *Why Asia?* Yang provides a smorgasbord of Asian and Asian American artists, but without explanation. In the first section, "Four Artists," she never reveals why she selects Rirkrit Tiravanija (Thai), Michael Joo (Korean American), Xu Bing (Chinese, U.S. resident), and Hou Chun-ming, (Taiwanese)—all men. Yang begins the second section evaluating the work of five individual artists, four men and one woman. Again, we wonder why she elevates these artists for special examination. Do her choices reflect the Asian patriarchal view? Perhaps. It is not until half way through the book that Yang, finally, casually and briefly, refers to gender issues.

Yang exhibits a predilection for installations and mixed media sculptures without clarifying why she focuses on these media, nor does she address their origins within the Asian context, leaving the viewer with only the Western paradigm.

Despite and because of its flaws, I would recommend *Why Asia?* for a graduate seminar on contemporary art or theory and criticism. Graduate seminars on U.S. American pluralism or contemporary Asia would find Yang's discussion of group exhibitions in section two and all of her critical essays in the third section very useful. *Why Asia?* might be appropriate for advanced undergraduates, but in general, I would not recommend the book for the undergraduate curriculum.

It is easier to critique the weaknesses in an endeavor such as Yang's when the author has set high goals and standards than to spend time on works with much lower expectations and results. I regret Yang will not be here to correct these oversights. Sadly, art history and criticism have lost someone with enormous energy and a fine mind. ■

**HILARY BRAYSMITH** is an Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Southern Indiana. She earned her Ph.D. in the History of Modern Art at Ohio State University in 1991 and was an NEH fellow at the East-West Center for the 1993 summer institute on Chinese culture.



**ALICE YANG** (1961–1997) was the Robert Lehman Curator and Curator of Collections and Exhibitions at the Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, and former Assistant Curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.

Text from the dust cover of *Why Asia?* Photo: David Lee