

John Clark

Asian Biennials: History, Practices, and Literature



Left: Cover of the catalogue for the 7th Biennale of Sydney, 1988.

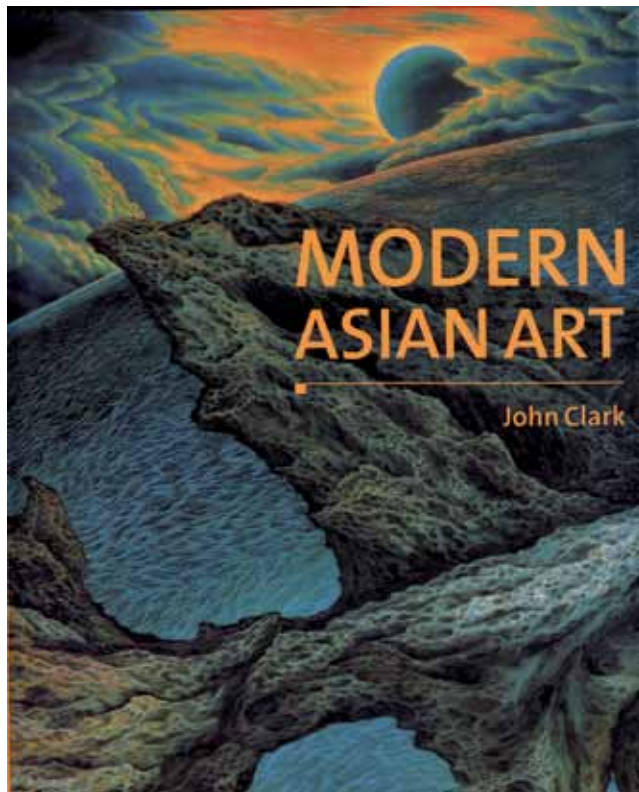
Right: Cover of the catalogue for the 1st Guangzhou Triennale, 2002.

Art History and Asian Biennials

Why look at biennials in Asia? These have usually been understood as part of a worldwide phenomenon of growth in large, regular, but temporary exhibitions. We can define biennials as periodically recurring temporary art exhibitions that usually survey both local and international contemporary art and that are held at the same geographical site and usually presented by the same organizing institution. As the term indicates, they are normally presented every two years; examples include the Venice Biennale (since 1895), the Biennale of Sydney (since 1973), the Bienal de Habana (since 1984), and the Shanghai Biennale (since 1994), or every three years as with the Guangzhou Triennale (since 2002). All the new Asian biennials, which began to emerge in the 1990s, had Euramerican precursors that often functioned as prescriptive models, or from which, in reaction, they may have sought to differentiate themselves.¹

One basic perspective for understanding Asian biennials could be a comparative one: how like or unlike are they to their precursors, or how are they basically derived from Euramerican predecessors? But that approach carries the art historical premise that in modern and contemporary art it is the Euramerican institutions and works that come prior, not the local, Asian ones. Or at least it leaves aside precisely the local adaption and transformation in changed historical contingencies that has accompanied modern Asian art since the 1850s.² One can go further and say that very difference in types of adaption, transformation, and local

John Clark, cover of *Modern Asian Art*, 1998.



development produces a notion of modernity that may not merely be beyond Euramerican categories; rather, it forces the very redefinition of Euramerican categories. This means the inclusion of Euramerican historical experiences and notions of modernity within a broader context, and not as originator but as one type within a larger hierarchy of modernities.³ One of the art historical reasons for focusing on Asian biennials is that they constitute a site for such modernities to become manifest.

It is often thought that biennials function as an international publicity site or sales point for those who otherwise would not have an advertising platform. On the one hand, biennials manifest the hidden hand of a local cultural bureaucracy and local taste. On the other hand, because biennials' entrepreneur-managers are drawn almost entirely from those who have become prominent in Euramerican curating, the advent of particular artists might suggest the hidden hand of the art market as it operates through the preferences of curators who, by the inclusion of an artwork, determine its cultural value and sometimes serve as the cultural capital acquisitions manager for the art objects bought by collectors and public museums.

Another focus on Asian biennials concerns definitions of the "contemporary." Beyond any simple notion of contemporary art being simply what is done now, the "contemporary" is a trope that allows a separation from the hegemonic discourse about the "modern."⁴ However defined, the "contemporary" posits that at some time in the recent past, say, in the shift from Pop to Conceptual art in the late 1960s, there was a broad and multi-causal change in Euramerican art discourses.

Terry Smith identifies postmodernist thought as freed from the constraints of singular narratives, a retro-sensationalism trending toward the spectacular, or a conceptualist reformulation of modernist devices—three defining elements in contemporary art. Smith articulates these further as being alongside decolonization and nationalism, globalization and internationalism, and cosmopolitanism and inter-communal translation.

Smith also identifies concerns and strategies such as world-making and temporal discontinuities. It is part of the attractiveness of Smith's analyses and the generality with which they can be applied beyond his original premise found in, but not always derived from, Euramerica that Asian examples appear without too much difficulty or do so with little inappropriateness. By not setting aside the notion of the rest of the world as the "Third World," a tendency associated with a long chain of principally left-minded thinkers allied to journals like *Third Text* and *October*,⁵ or, from another capitalist liberalist perspective, as "Newly Industrialized Economies," or, again, as another avatar of the singularity of the Euramerican modern,⁶ Smith has enormously widened the grasp of his Euramerican frame. But that this frame allows evidence for a global cosmopolitanism is to be doubted, even if one believes, as I do, that this is possible.⁷

The art historical grasp of movements that give sovereignty to all the cultural domains between which the transfer of artworks take place, and not just the Euramerican one, requires relativizing the contemporary as temporally—and in many cases culturally—



Wu Ershan, *The New Land*, 2004, installation and performance at the 2004 Shanghai Biennale.

specific. Thus we encounter another important reason for looking at Asian biennials; they are another site that tells us—if "we" still need telling—where the West is no longer the West anymore. This is because the historical viewpoint capable of grasping work found at Asian biennials must be beyond both the temporality of the Euramerican—read "global contemporary"—and the cultural limitations of the West. In addition, the range and distribution of elements that define Asian contemporary as "Asian" will be counterposed by those that are "Euramerican," as also found in selections of works that are put alongside those that are "South American," "African," or "Near Eastern/West Asian." How this counterposition allows a differential mapping of a broader generic series of "modernities" requires some effort to understand, but it can be seen as both theoretically necessary and empirically feasible.⁸

Markets for Transnational Art Selection

In looking at biennials as part of the structure and operations of an international art system, it becomes clear that the flow of artworks that are governed by the hidden hand of the art market requires considerable qualification. In the 1990s and early 2000s, art markets were multi-levelled and provided various switching points where conversion took place between artworks that had cultural value and art objects that had economic

value.⁹ Many local markets separated themselves in quasi-autonomy from international markets, like that of *pleinairiste* oil painting in Japan. But despite the barely disguised tendency of some Chinese contemporary artists and, beginning around 2005, of some Indian artists, to sell directly via auction houses, the secondary market in near-contemporary artworks was largely a market of historical objects. These objects may even indirectly have been those of the recent past, for which time or cultural distance had sufficiently elapsed for some kind of market appraisal of them as art objects independent of their original cultural consecration as artworks. Of course, cultural consecration can come before the economic, especially for some national agendas. In addition, many artworks found at biennials are not saleable, being temporary or project-based installations. Although, when the biennial is held in an art museum, some works might be purchased through commission, as they have been over a number of the Asia Pacific Triennials in Brisbane. In a few cases, as well, parts of works can be reconfigured or reassembled, from which units can be sold via dealers. The biennial thus serves as an archive of works to be remediated at other sites.

An “Asian” Set of Biennial Structures

Parallel to difficulties in understanding how the market in art objects actually operates, and perhaps the greatest is within the international biennials’ system, including new biennials in Asia, is the lack of transparency about the internal economic structure. I cannot think of any biennial that has a full and clear costing system: all the Asian biennials I have examined have large and undeclared costs because the institutions in which they are based have not charged the biennial budget for what are in-kind services, or the relevant local, regional, or national governments waived rentals of buildings or staff. Even if there are reasonably reliable figures available in the public domain, such as the Singapore Biennale, these do not usually include notional rent for buildings or properties used for exhibitions. More importantly, there are many indirect benefits for financial sponsors or contra-exchanges with sponsors or other institutions, such as those declared by Queensland Art Gallery in its 2005 financial report. In addition, indirect benefits flow to galleries or patrons who support the making of

View towards Minato-mirai
Yokohama from Yamashita
Pier, site of the 2005
Yokohama Triennale.





Site of the National Art Gallery of Singapore. Courtesy of the National Art Gallery of Singapore.

large artworks shown at biennials, benefits that are recouped later at sale via a commercial gallery; for example, works shown in the Venice Biennale may appear one or two years later at the Basel Art Fair, Basel Miami, and now Basel Hong Kong. With some artists who are highly prominent on the biennial circuit, there is a kind of venture or speculative capital investment by individual curatorial entrepreneurs who are able to mobilize these funds from dealers or collectors for the making of artworks.¹⁰

Despite variation in the structure of curation, biennials still by and large function as national art sites, either through a format of national representation, as exemplified by São Paulo or Venice, or through dedicated subvention to an artist at a particular biennial, such as government financial support for sending French, German, or Japanese artists to Sydney, amounting to financial support not only for the artists but for the biennials as well. Indeed, one former artistic director of the Biennale of Sydney, René Block, has suggested that there are three biennial models: 1) Venice: pavilions and national autonomy, completely financed by participating countries; followed by the early São Paulo Bienals; 2) Sydney: smaller exhibitions curated by an artistic director, but dependent on the financial participation of other countries, a model followed by most biennials in the 1980s and 90s; and 3) Gwangju: independent of foreign support, sometimes determines themes and then invites curators. Other examples of such independence are the Berlin Biennale and Sharjah Biennale.¹¹

Biennial participation and organization intrinsically operate within international cultural relations, almost all with political motivation. These political aims, whether of a regional kind as with Gwangju or Brisbane, or of a national dimension as with Yokohama and Beijing, are more evident in newer Biennials. The newer ones tend to have been founded with an explicit justification to a local governmental funder, a justification that requires a statement of intent and a formal evaluation of political outcomes for the funds invested.¹² Ridiculous curatorial claims have sometimes been made about the political independence of a biennial, or its artistic director, when these were carried out for political aims, and in many cases were impossible without the direct complicity of the nation-state.

Perhaps such external goals too often cast into shade the internal goals of the exhibiting organization, whether it is a “temporary” biennial office or an institutionally founded extant gallery. The biennial has an agentive function for its organizers that allows them, with time and politicians’ perception of their success, to secure broader support for contemporary art and the funding for a new National Art Gallery, such as in Singapore, a Gallery of Modern Art, such as in Brisbane, or to establish a biennial as compensation for the lack of such an institution, such as in Jakarta. The biennial even functions as a switching mechanism to give contemporary art a place it had not properly found in existing well-founded institutions that were perceived to be in the hands of cultural conservatives, such as New Delhi, where its first biennial was unrealized but eventually succeeded in Kochi in 2012.

However, at the national level, despite their political goals, biennials, particularly in Asia, have highly contradictory identities as an analytical unit for understanding. They operate on behalf of a nation but they function with other units that are international, be they other governments or their cultural organizations. The context is not one of being permanently isolated or relatively closed, but that open up to the outside under certain conditions. Biennials deal with producers and mediators who increasingly have multiple geographical identities, travelling between states for access to education, exhibitions, or information. Even though many artists and mediators position themselves as belonging to, or as having originated in, one nation-state, they are of necessity mobile, or at least know they can move. These potentialities are part of the interlocking trajectories that form their art or the criteria used to select works for exhibition. They thus constitute a transnational cohort of curatorial actors, insofar as they produce interpersonal relations, and thus a transnational cultural space. That they do so is in part due to the opportunities of the new global economic and political systems.

The biennial manifests the different stages and strategies of becoming for a nation and the national art world phenomena that are articulated through it. At the same time, it makes real a new trajectory directed away from the nation that is not necessarily toward a hybrid inter-nation but that allows for the display of tendencies found across many national sites. The biennial thus proclaims an interspace that denies the restrictive units—the



nations—that need to open up for that interspace to manifest itself. This is an intrinsic contradiction that is mitigated in favour of a new transnation. Even as it strengthens the possibility of national emphasis as some form of identity or origination within a new order, it also mitigates against the nation as a unit that constitutes the international biennial system. In this ambiguity lies the international system’s dynamic, but also its possibility of abuse at the level of new biennials.

Top: Ai Weiwei, *Boomerang*, 2006, metal and crystal, installation at the Asia Pacific Triennial V, 2006. Courtesy of the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.

Ai Weiwei, *Chandelier*, 2008, metal and crystal, installation at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2009.

The policies of biennials as an institution that provides services to a patron, usually through a local or national government, and of servicing clients who are artists and viewers of art, reinforce the potentiality of the mediator-curator. This figure stands between guaranteeing the satisfactory provision of a service to a certain perceived standard, of satisfying the need for artists to be recognized, and of audiences to see art that they recognize as art. In certain cases, such as Gwangju and Chengdu, the notion of contemporaneity in art might be unfamiliar for much of the local audience, thus biennials often have a didactic role for audiences who need to be educated about contemporary art. The convenient relationship to an untutored audience, is highly suitable to the unquestioned propagation of claims by curators about their exhibition’s concepts or significance: the site they occupy from the audience’s perspective is not a critical or an educated one. This is true despite the fact that curators themselves may think that their own position with regard to art, and even to biennials, is one that involves critique.



Yayoi Kusama, *Ladder to Heaven*, 2002, mirror, steel, fiber optics, installation at Singapore Biennale, 2006.

What accounts for the movement of an artist and their work in or out of biennial circulation? In some cases, like that of several large pieces by Ai Weiwei, this circulation can be essentially of the same massive piece in appearing different guises as it moves between biennial and museum sites. It also could be that after the initial curatorial selection, some kind of system-stabilizing function is performed by the opinions arrived at and circulated among curators. These views then became a convention within the circuit of cementing in, or in most cases cementing out, future selection of the same artist or works. This process becomes all the more effective through the negative power of these judgements because there is an implicit need to maintain the restrictiveness of the selection and therefore the relative closure of the system. This exclusion increases the apparent regularity and order of the system as well as reinforces the status of those privileged to maintain it, the mediator-curators.

Types of Functioning in the Global[ized] Art World

The existence of common discourses, or at least related positions in art practices, are basic features of the borrowing among artists within the transnational art world, and the similarities of the technical parameters of video, the use of resins, and modelling techniques derived from architectural displays are more ways of extending but not necessarily productively moving away from earlier positions based in an international system of state relations. Biennials face not only the problems of common practices and techniques that are inherent to most of the art world, but also develop the ability to find art that moves between cultures. This is in some sense a counter-systemic capability, one that can still be inflected culturally with benefit to its inter-referentiality. This potential of biennials as exhibitionary spaces or sites still retains the disjunction between those exhibitors or selectors or audiences who see work elsewhere and those who do not. Information might flow across old boundaries but many of the practitioners and most of the audiences do not.

Would it be valuable or feasible to have a continually floating, relatively elastic transnational art world? I think not. The limitations of political censorship may maintain walls, but so do value impediments based in one set of cultural values at a particular site, be it New York, Paris, Dacca, or Dakar. These limitations or constraints are needed to create a potential space for change rather than an eternal fluidity. Many artists still have their eyes either on Euramerica or on home, wherever they may locate it. Nonetheless, some convivial and co-discursive relations do emerge for individual artists by their participation in non-Euramerican biennials.¹³ The transnational art world, because in general it vertically relies on Euramerican art media for information circulation and on Euramerican art markets for the circulation of works, still lacks a critical press and a distribution system of its own that would help it to achieve the horizontal circulation of ideas and works between non-Euramerican sites. This can be seen through the elevation of a very limited number of Asian artists to international art star status and the restriction of the rest to that of interesting but minor players.

One might think that Asian biennials are intended to achieve this horizontal circulation for contemporary Asian art. They have done this to some extent and may increasingly do so in future if the Asian inter-linkages become more stable and developed beyond so many sets of binary national exchanges. But the latter step will be possible only if this biennial sub-system develops a regionally specific type of transnationality and does not remain forever defined in Euramerican terms.

Redefinitions of Modernity and the Asian Modern

Many biennial curators consider themselves to be working in domains that permit them to engineer the escape of contemporary art discourses from previous hegemonies of control that are based on resisting hitherto Euramerican modernist genealogies: colonial, class-based, and gender-demeaning. Their considered task is to make the artwork more visible and their own work more transparent. Some think the artist and the curator have merged.¹⁴ It is not self-evident why such an embedded set of choices in highly organized if recurrently temporary sites, whose space is as institutional as the curators' place in it is circumscribed, should be regarded as a radical unfolding of the new. These phenomena look more like a Euramerican transfer to independent "Asian" curators of the functions of Western intellectuals under early Bolshevism as "engineers of human souls."¹⁵ This could be a sign of an older hegemony re-establishing itself.

The aims and some of the operations of such curators are understandable and, from some political positions, laudable in their own way. But they do not help us with two persistent sets of questions because of ideological hostility to the artwork that is conceived of as a hangover from high bourgeois salon practice and that still needs to be de-mystified. And many curators also repeatedly conceive of art *making* as art *production* that is materialist and communal. This impedes an understanding of the role of imagination in art making that is idealist and individual. Indeed, the "curatorial turn" toward privileging the site, mode, and operator of the site of exhibition is a denudation of the function of artworks as imaginative extensions of an other-than-quotidian space, as ways of knowing the world that does not depend on reason or planning, and as the work of making agents, artists, who are the exhibitors of first resort, not the last.

De-mystification systemically de-privileges other kinds, or culturally distant but potentially still humanly cognate types, of mystification. We cannot assume modern and contemporary Asian artworks are all compromised by the Euramerican genealogy of modernism, or in the same ways. Understanding the discursive field of Asian modernism and its classificatory possibilities, as well as its transformations of Euramerican modernism, must begin from this recognition.

Taking the second and more important set of questions a bit further, everyday space is not the same everywhere, although it might misleadingly appear so in the "airport lounge" spaces of high or post-modernity. There are so many culturally framed ways of knowing the world other than by

“universal” reason that any such knowledge conveyed or gained via artworks will always be larger than the paradigmatic Euramerican set. Thus the curator will also appear in an authorial position denuded by the complex interplay of cultural, social, and economic forces, not to mention the embedded aesthetic preferences in artworks. These specific forces have been ignored in the spectacularization of site in the multiplying Asian biennials and in the restricted list of operators who constitute the curatorial field or the limited number of artists who constitute its producers.

But the most critical question concerns modernity itself. If our understanding of Asian biennials is framed by an inquiry into Asian modernity and contemporaneity in art, we will see the biennials as manifestations of a quite discrete if not entirely independent series of frames into which some, but not all, of Euramerican engagements fit. It is the “some but not all” that is the critical lever here. Unfortunately, only recently have Asian biennials themselves, together with some linkages through the artist-run networks, made the inter-regional comparability of Asian art worlds and the functioning of artworks, artists, and curators much more feasible, and in cases of linkages to the wider world, more pressing.

Trans-nationality can be seen to function as a site beyond national constructions, and trans-globality can be regarded as a supranational distributional phenomenon of significant forces in art. Both can overlap and, in their resistance to other-imposed hegemonies, also can be in conflict. I think they have diverted attention from the varieties of modernity and contemporaneity and occluded understanding of types of modernity other than the Euramerican. There is every sign that the linkage between biennials and market appraisal via regional art fairs, of which the linkage of Art Basel Hong Kong to art markets in China and Japan is only the most prominent, has almost in the last hour vitiated understanding Asia as having its own modernities.

Beyond these phenomena, as operating sites of art world forces, Asian biennials have significantly globalized what was a burgeoning local Asian set of markets for Asian contemporary art. The plethora of biennials in Asia as *de facto* canon makers transnationally intervenes with and alters judgements about the contemporary in Asian art in its different cultural locales. These judgements are conventionalized by shifting evaluatory criteria to a top-down transnational level. Transnational processes thus evacuate the Asian modern of its global meaning as a reflexive re-positioning of the *modern* in art.

Notes

- ¹ The author considers the term Euramerican most correct and has used it in all his writing since 1992.
- ² See John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House and Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 49–70.
- ³ See John Clark, *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art of the 1980s and 1990s* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2010), 26–27.
- ⁴ See in particular Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art? Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity and Art to Come* (Sydney: Artspace Visual Art Centre, 2001); Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Terry Smith, "The State of Art History: Contemporary Art," *Art Bulletin* 92, no. 4 (December 2010), 366–83; and his examination of artworks seen worldwide, Terry Smith, *Contemporary Arts: World Currents* (London: Laurence King, 2011). These and other related books are sensibly reviewed by Robert Slifkin, *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 1 (2012), 111–14; Nikos Papastergiadis, "Can There Be a History of Contemporary Art?" *Discipline*, no. 2 (Autumn 2012); Andrew McNamara, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 12 (2012), *Open Issue*, 259–61; and in a hostile and unsympathetic review at capscrits.blogspot.com/2011/.
- ⁵ See Hal Foster, Rosalind Kraus, Yves-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900, Modernism, Anti-Modernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), and my review, "A short review of a very, very long book," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2005), 107.
- ⁶ Jameson, among other thinkers, consigns all the difficult cases of pre-modernity to a reactionary past defined against positions in Euramerican intellectual and other histories. See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 53.
- ⁷ Recent books from a sociological viewpoint on cosmopolitanism include Gerard Delanty, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination: The Renewal of Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and Nikos Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).
- ⁸ See Clark, *Asian Modernities*, 23–47.
- ⁹ A summary view of capital transfer to the art market, for those with such capital to transfer, is Christoph Pauly, "Rich Move Assets from Banks to Warehouses," *Spiegel online*, July 24, 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/business/art-as-alternative-investment-creates-storage-business-tax-haven-a-912798.html/>.
- ¹⁰ I am indebted to Joe Hill, with whom I spoke in an unrecorded conversation in Shanghai in September 2006, for this insight.
- ¹¹ In René Block, "We hop on, we hop off: the ever-faster spinning carousel of Biennials," *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art* 12, no. 2 (May/June 2013), 33–34. This is basically the same view he has advanced elsewhere, including in an unpublished interview with me of June 2006.
- ¹² Doug Hall, "It seemed like a good idea at the time," *Art Asia Pacific*, no. 83 (May/June 2013), 80, states: "More than anything else, APT provided the *raison d'être* for the new GOMA, an idea supported regardless of which political party was in office, an idea that was to provide the largest space for Australians to engage with the art of their time, and that includes all cultures—not just Asian, of course."
- ¹³ This was widely mentioned in my interviews with artists during the main period of research, and most recently in December 2009, by Nilima Sheikh, about APTII in 1996, and in December 2009, with Sheba Chhachhi, about Havana in 2000.
- ¹⁴ See Boris Groys, "On the Curatorship," in Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2008), 51: "The independent curator is a radically secularized artist. He is an artist because he does everything artists do. But he is an artist who has lost the artist's aura, who no longer has magical transformative powers at his disposal, who cannot endow objects with artistic status. He doesn't use objects—art objects included—for art's sake, but rather abuses them, makes them profane . . . The contemporary curator is the heir apparent to the modern artist, although he doesn't suffer from his predecessor's magical abnormalities. He is an artist but he is atheistic and 'normal' through and through. The curator is the agent of art's profanation, its secularization. Its abuse."
- ¹⁵ Many curators in addition to Enwezor advance a left nostalgia that motivates their contemporary progressivist curatorship. They long for a revolution that did not take place, and they seek an art world means to re-manifest a utopian position or to determine a route to political utopia. See Charles Esche and de Appel CP, "Stand I Don't," in Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, eds., *Curating and the Educational Turn* (London: Open Editions, Amsterdam: De Appel, 2010), 299–300.