

IMPORT EXPORT

ALTERED STATES

"The Third Mind," now at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, traces the long-standing influence of Eastern thought and esthetics on American artists.

BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

EAST IS EAST, and West is West, but, Kipling's pronouncement at the height of the British Raj notwithstanding, the two great regions of the world have been meeting artistically and intellectually for a long, long time. Long enough, at least, for American modern artists to have eagerly soaked up some of the defining philosophic and esthetic principles of the once-exotic "Orient."

That premise lies at the heart of "The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989," now on view at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (through Apr. 19). The exhibition's title is taken from a 1977 book of the same name, a collection of "cut-ups" by the Beat writers William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, whose spontaneous method of composition, using randomly selected texts and images (including Gysin's pseudo-Arabic calligraphic squiggles), paralleled American artists' unpredictable blendings of art-making approaches and techniques, derived from Asian sources, which often yielded results that are more than the sum of Eastern and Western ingredients. Very big—and, some critics have suggested, somewhat unwieldy—"The Third Mind" goes way beyond familiar, art-history factoids about 19th-century Japanese woodblock prints, with their quirky perspectives and saturated colors, striking wide-eyed French Impressionists with a *coup de foudre*. Instead, with some 260 works by 114 American and Asian-American artists, the show focuses on instances in which U.S.-based practitioners have explored inspiring ideas from Japan, China, India and other parts of Asia—primarily through translated texts or the sharing of personal travel notes and research—and incorporated them into their own practices.

"The Third Mind" charts that contact, over more than a century, right up to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, which made possible a



new era of rampant globalization. The recent upsurge of economic power in the East—last September, China became the U.S. government's biggest creditor—is probably not something Alexandra Munroe, the principal curator of "The Third Mind," could have foreseen when she began developing the exhibition a decade ago. However, as part of the cultural-political backdrop against which this survey has been unveiled, the trend contributes greatly to the show's timeliness. Moreover, Munroe's presence on the Guggenheim's curatorial staff signals the art establishment's recognition of Asia's impressive rise. A specialist in Japanese modern and contemporary art, Munroe was appointed the Guggenheim's first-ever senior curator of Asian art in 2006, becoming (according to Guggenheim officials) the first curator in her field in

Allen Ginsberg: Sea of Japan, 1963, gelatin silver print, with inscription, 10 1/2 by 14 inches. Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York. Courtesy Allen Ginsberg Trust, New York.

any major modern- or contemporary-art museum in the U.S. or Europe.

In part, that appointment reinforces the museum's penchant for international programming as a means of promoting its global institutional brand. But it also recognizes Munroe's past curatorial achievements in her field, including the organization of "Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky" (Yokohama Museum of Art and Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, 1994-95), "Yes: Yoko Ono" (Japan Society, New York, 2000) and—in collaboration with artist Takashi Murakami—"Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subcultures" (Japan Society/Public Art Fund, New York, 2005).

Even as "The Third Mind" records what Munroe recently referred to as

RESPONDING TO EASTERN IDEAS, WHISTLER, DOW AND CASSATT ABSTRACTED THEIR SUBJECTS INTO GEOMETRIC SHAPES AND FLAT COLOR PASSAGES THAT EVOKE THE AMBIGUOUS DEPTHS OF UKIYO-E.



John La Farge: *The Last Waterlilies*, 1862, oil on wood, 9¼ by 7½ inches. Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.

the "appropriation, assimilation and integration" by American artists of formal and intellectual tenets from various Asian sources, it also examines how a large segment of Western art evolved from handcrafted objects that depict particular subjects into something intangible instead—transient experiences whose purpose is to provoke a shift in a viewer's consciousness. The exhibition tracks the dissolution of traditional artworks from their physical forms as paintings, drawings or sculptures into little more than ephemeral events or, sometimes, the varied forms of documentation—photographs, videos, soundtracks—that record their occurrences.

"The Third Mind" begins by examining the effects of Asian esthetics on certain 19th-century artists, writers and collectors who had ties to New England. In the early 1800s, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who had studied Buddhism and Hinduism,

proposed that any individual, without depending on religious doctrines, could achieve a spiritual state that transcends the known physical world. They believed in a union of the inner, private soul with the broader spirit of external nature.

In the 1850s, after U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry's "black ships" sailed into Tokyo Bay and forcibly opened feudal Japan to contact with the West, even more Buddhist-centered ideas about humankind's relationship with the cosmos began to filter out of long-isolated Old Nippon. So did the ukiyo-e woodblock prints, ceramics and screen paintings that opened American eyes to a previously little-known esthetic system. Later, China's and Japan's pavilions at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago highlighted arts and cultures of the East. The American scholar Ernest Fenollosa, who had moved to Japan in the late 1870s and assembled an art collection there, organized the Japanese presentation at that historic fair. In 1890, Fenollosa had returned to Boston to become the head of the Oriental art department at the Museum of Fine Arts, where his own Japanese collection would find a home.

Like Fenollosa, the painter and stained-glass designer John La Farge, associated with the Aesthetic Movement, brought information about Japan back home in visual form. La Farge traveled to Japan in 1886 with the historian Henry Adams, who was mourning the suicide of his wife, Clover. Watercolors La Farge painted during and after their trip, as well as the travel letters he published in 1897, contained vivid images of exotic landscapes and unusual subjects, such as the 13th-century Amida Buddha at Kamakura.

La Farge's watercolors of the giant bronze statue and of a Japanese waterfall are on view in the exhibition; so is a plaster cast of sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens's memorial for Clover Adams. The latter is an androgynous, shrouded figure whose original, in bronze, sits on a granite base designed by Stanford White in a Washington, D.C., cemetery. Henry Adams, in commissioning Saint-Gaudens to create the monument, proposed that it should reflect the spirit of Eastern philosophy. Vivien Greene, the Guggenheim's curator of 19th-century and early 20th-century art, who organized the first section of "The Third Mind," in which this work appears, notes that the moody, meditative sculpture "was the most

public work of its time to refer so strongly to Eastern sources."²

Other "Third Mind" artists who served as emissaries of Eastern ideas include the London-based American James McNeill Whistler, whose paintings *Nocturne: Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge* (ca. 1872-75) and *Nocturne* (1875-80) tend to abstract and dissolve their urban subjects into diaphanous washes that evoke the flat color passages and ambiguous depths of ukiyo-e. In Paris, the American expatriate Mary Cassatt was deeply moved by a Japanese woodblock exhibition she saw in 1890. Especially inspired by Kitagawa Utamaro, she expertly adapted his styling and gentle palette to her own drypoint technique.

During the early 20th century, in New York, the painter, photographer and teacher Arthur Wesley Dow drew comparisons between the works of the ukiyo-e master Utagawa Hiroshige and those of Piero della Francesca, and urged artists to follow the principles of *nōtan*, a Japanese approach to balancing a picture's composition. Dow's photographs of the Grand Canyon and his own woodblock prints, in which elements of landscapes are reduced to simple geometric shapes, expressed *nōtan*'s esthetic ideals. They are shown at the Guggenheim along with Augustus Vincent Tack's oil painting of the Rocky Mountains, *The Voice of Many Waters* (ca. 1923-24)—a Dow-influenced work affected as well by Chinese Tang period sources—and a young Georgia O'Keeffe's 1916 watercolor abstractions. O'Keeffe had studied with Dow in 1914-15; in 1959 and 1960, she



James McNeill Whistler: *Nocturne: Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge*, ca. 1872-75, oil on canvas, 26¾ by 20¾ inches. Tate, London.



Above, Alvin Langdon Coburn: *Regent's Canal, London*, 1904, photogravure print, 8½ by 6¾ inches. George Eastman House, Rochester.

Right, Franz Kline: *Mahoning*, 1956, oil and paper collage on canvas, 80 by 100 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Left, Mary Cassatt: *The Letter*, 1890-91, drypoint and aquatint on paper, 13¼ by 8¼ inches. New York Public Library.

would become the only member of Alfred Stieglitz's circle to travel to Asia.

"The Third Mind" includes a small section on Asia-related currents in modern poetry and dance theater. In 1913, for example, a year after the posthumous publication of Fenollosa's *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, the late scholar's widow asked Ezra Pound to edit his remaining manuscripts, including his writings about Japan's Nō theater and his translations of Chinese classical poetry. Inspired by this material, Pound began to develop a new kind of poetry in English. Concise and marked by free verse, it influenced T.S. Eliot's composition of *The Waste Land* (1922), the great modernist poem that incorporates references to ancient Hindu scriptures. W.B. Yeats, moved by Fenollosa's Nō material, wrote a play, *At the Hawk's Well*, whose debut production in England, in 1916, featured the Japanese performer Michio Itō. The exhibition contains a black-and-white photograph, made around 1916 by Alvin Langdon Coburn, showing Itō in a hawk costume from the play. In New York in 1923, Itō introduced the Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi to choreographer Martha Graham. Noguchi's set designs for Graham's groundbreaking productions like *Frontier* (1935), seen here in a 1935 film clip, brought Nō's characteristic austerity to the modern-dance stage.



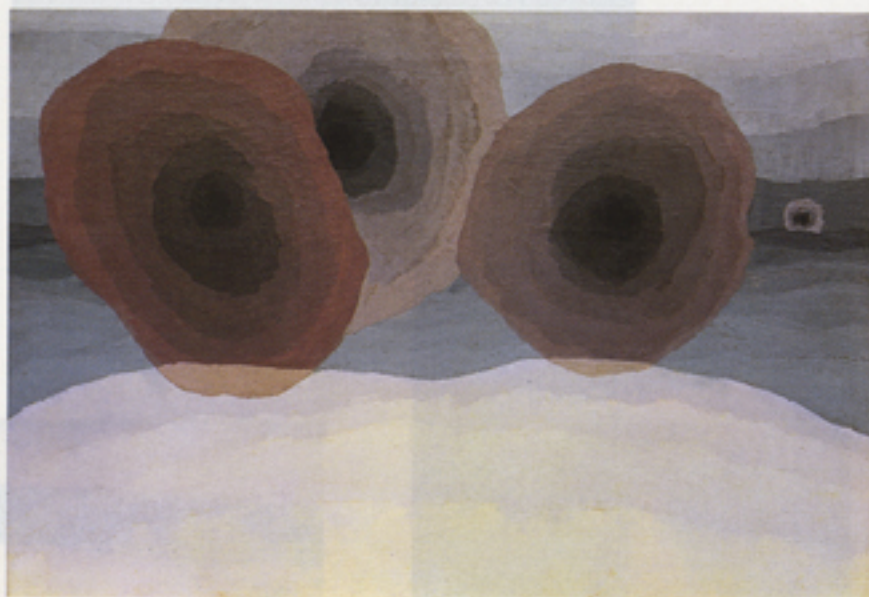
OVER DISTANCE AND TIME, AMERICAN ARTISTS SHARED THEIR ASIAN DISCOVERIES: TEXTS, BRUSH-HANDLING METHODS, MEDITATION TECHNIQUES AND SUCH ANTIMATERIALIST NOTIONS AS UNIVERSAL ONENESS.

And so the creative currents flow throughout "The Third Mind." The show documents incessant, overlapping waves of meetings and idea-sharing across long stretches of distance and time among artists excited by their Asian discoveries: texts, brush-handling methods, meditation techniques and such decidedly antimaterialist notions as universal oneness, "reality" as a sense-deceiving transient state, and nirvana as self-transcendence and eternal perfection. Experimental composer John Cage, who shared his considerable knowledge of Zen Buddhist thought (acquired largely from the teachings of Japanese scholar D.T. Suzuki) with just about everyone, routinely pops up in many of these exchanges—in Seattle, for

example, in the late 1930s, in dialogue with abstract painter Mark Tobey and perhaps most famously in New York, in the late 1950s, with artists who went on to form the event-oriented Fluxus group, several of whom (including Dick Higgins, George Brecht and Jackson Mac Low) took Cage's music-composition course at the New School for Social Research.

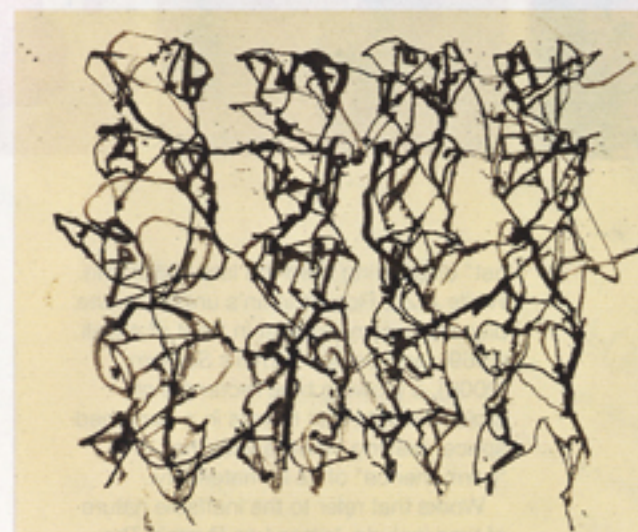
In some of its most vivid displays of Asian technical influences on American-made modernist art, "The Third Mind" presents a large sampling of abstract works inspired by East Asian calligraphy. Examples include Tobey's "white writing" paintings; Franz Kline's broad-brushed, black-on-white canvases; Robert Motherwell's splashes of black and colored inks on Japanese paper from his "Lyric Suite" (1965); and Brice

Marden's ink-on-paper "Cold Mountain Studies" (1988-90), which interpret classical Chinese texts (their characters written with brushes in vertical rows) in eloquent, wiggly-squiggly form. In 1958, critic Clement Greenberg chauvinistically claimed that none of Ab-Ex's big guns, "least of all Kline," had "felt more than a cursory interest in Oriental art."³ However, "The Third Mind" purposefully argues that East Asian calligraphy may well have been the most pervasive influence on several generations of American abstractionists. For example, Philip Guston's black-ink-on-paper drawings from the early 1950s hold clues to the mass-building and composition-shaping he employed in his abstract canvases of that time. Likewise, sculptor David Smith's twig-thin, abstract forms in bronze evoke the simultaneously



Right, Arthur Dove: *Fog Horns*, 1929, oil on canvas, 21 1/4 by 28 1/4 inches. Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.

Below, Walter De Maria: *Triangle, Circle, Square*, 1972, three brushed stainless-steel elements, each approx. 39 inches wide. Menil Collection, Houston. Photo Hickey-Robertson.



Above, John Cage: #5, from the "New River Watercolor Series I," 1988, watercolor on parchment paper, 18 by 36 inches. Collection Ray Kass. © John Cage Trust at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.

Left, Brice Marden: 10, from the series "Cold Mountain Studies," 1988-90, ink on paper, 8 by 9 1/4 inches. © ARS.

studied and spontaneous gesture that is a hallmark of traditional, East Asian calligraphic mark-making.

From Cage, who used the mechanism of the *I Ching* (the Chinese *Book of Changes*) to frame his chance-based approach to composing music and was also deeply influenced by the Zen sensibility he had assimilated, Fluxus inherited its defining feature: the idea that works of art could be deliberately conceived actions taking place in the everyday world and that, like musical compositions, they could be scored. "The Third Mind" features a selection of Fluxus works, including such early "instruction" pieces as Yoko Ono's *Painting to Be Constructed in Your Head* (1), 1962, whose Japanese text (translated into English for the wall label and catalogue) invitingly commands in part: "Go on transforming a square canvas in your head until it becomes a circle." For Ono—who was born and brought up in Japan, then studied and worked in the U.S. and England—the Zen-flavored

ethos that Fluxus embraced came naturally. Recently she recalled: "I had been breathing that culture all my life."⁴

Fluxus artist Alison Knowles, represented by several remakes from her silkscreen-on-canvas series "The Identical Lunch" (1973/92), remembers: "It was the time of Abstract Expressionism; a lot of us were trying to find a way away from Pollock. Cage offered another direction, event 'scores' which, like the Japanese tea ceremony, implied a process and a pinnacle of experience in the moment."⁵ Laurie Anderson, who has contributed both a sculptural installation and a storytelling performance to the show, learned about

Beat poetry in college and later got to know Beat poet Allen Ginsberg personally. Through such encounters, she became familiar with Buddhist thought and embraced it herself.

The legacy of earlier generations of American artists who had looked to Asia for inspiration, Anderson recently observed, came "directly from Buddhism," and, simply put, "always placed an emphasis on paying attention." Thus, she notes of Minimalist art: "I'm surprised it was never described as 'American Buddhist art,' because a lot of the artists were meditators." Their works, Anderson added, fostered ways "of looking at the ordinary and being able to suspend time." The influences "came from another place, and that place, ultimately, was India—from the force and power of meditation."⁶ Included in the exhibition as both an installation and a performance site is La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's *Dream House* (1962-present), a sound-and-light environment in which an endless electronic drone and colored lights



Right, Sengai Gibon: *Circle, Triangle and Square*, early 19th century, ink on paper, 11 1/4 by 18 1/4 inches. Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo.

projected onto sculptural shapes give perceptible form to the ethereal state that is meditative trance.

That Asian-metaphysical, purge-your-mind-and-pay-attention vibe—a call for heightened awareness of the so-called real external world and of the inner world of the spirit at the same time—courses through "The Third Mind" and finds its apotheosis in certain works of art whose subject appears to be consciousness itself. These include one of Ad Reinhardt's black paintings from the 1960s, which he described as "pure, abstract . . . timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested";⁷ a Yayoi Kusama "infinity

MUNROE'S EXHIBITION TRACKS THE DISSOLUTION OF TRADITIONAL ARTWORKS FROM THEIR PHYSICAL FORMS AS PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS OR SCULPTURES INTO LITTLE MORE THAN EPHEMERAL EVENTS OR THEIR DOCUMENTATION.



net" oil painting from the late 1950s (*No. White A.Z.*); Robert Irwin's untitled white disc that seems to float in front of a wall (1969); and James Turrell's *Sojourn* (2006), a glowing blue rectangle of projected light that hovers in a darkened space, teasing viewers with the "permanence" of its immateriality.

Works that refer to the ineffable nature of time include James Lee Byars's *The Death of James Lee Byars* (1982/94), a room-size sepulchre, lined in fluttering gold leaf, containing a bier on which five crystals memorialize the artist (who would lie on the platform during performances, practicing death), as well as the 1979 video *Mitchell's Death*, in which, with acupuncture needles in her

face, artist Linda Montano mourns the demise of her husband in a homemade, chant-talking rite that taps into Hinduism, Buddhism and Catholicism. Less effectively, Ann Hamilton's metaphor for the literary transmission of influences from East to West, the sculptural installation *human carriage* (2009), repeatedly sends chopped-up, bound-together pages of print whizzing down the entire length of the Guggenheim spiral on a metal rail, occasionally ringing bells as they pass.

The exhibition ends with Tehching Hsieh's documentation of his emblematic *Punching the Time Clock on the Hour, One-Year Performance* (1980-81), in which the New York-based, Taiwanese-American performance artist, uniformed like a workman, clocked in (nearly) every hour on the hour, every day, for one year. Still photos and a time-lapse film, together capturing his hair growth and mounting fatigue, and 366 daily time-punch cards bear witness to Hsieh's endurance for the sake of an artwork that was as intangible as its subject itself: the passing of time.

If Hsieh's work offers the most dramatic illustration of Munroe's thesis that Asian notions about the nature of reality and what esthetic experiences could or should be ultimately led many American artists to abandon the physical art object altogether, it might also beg a question for diehard postmodernists: where is Marcel Duchamp in all of this? Didn't conceptual art's sainted European founder obliterate the conventional work

of art, replacing the hallowed art object with the primacy of its motivating idea, nearly a century ago?

"All of the artists in the exhibition had documented contacts with Asia or with Asian ideas," Munroe noted. "Cage wore Asia on his sleeve, like his learning about Zen Buddhism. But Duchamp did not express interest in Asia, and his gesture was not one about transcendence, but rather one of anti-art, critiquing the established art system." By contrast, Cage and other American artists whose works "The Third Mind" examines did actively look to Asia for inspiration and allowed their findings to shape their attitudes and creations in what Munroe calls "spiritually uplifting and even quasimystical ways." Such notions, she points out, are anathema to the irony-loving, pomo doctrinaires indebted to Duchamp.

Munroe suggested that "The Third Mind," which opened as President Barack Obama took office, reflects a "new interpretation of America's cultural identity," one that "is more aligned with the United States' Pacific coast and with Asian cultures, and that sees Obama making a historic move for inclusiveness beyond the traditional, white establishment." Now, however, in the Internet-and-globalization era in which, as Robert Irwin once remarked, artists no longer make "art" but merely produce "culture" instead,⁸ are Americans really all that much more aware of Asia—its people, cultures, history and politics? Yoko Ono observed: "I think Asia is still a mystery element in

Western life, and that's okay in a way." For Alison Knowles, that enigmatic quality of Asia's represents something "timeless and eternal." "When people need that, they go get it," she said. "They find it, and it's always there." ◊

¹ All Alexandra Munroe quotes are from interviews with the author, New York, Jan. 10 and 29, 2009. ² Vivian Greene, interview with the author, New York, Jan. 26, 2009. ³ From Greenberg's "American-Type Painting" (1955), quoted in Bert Winther-Tamaki, "The Asian Dimensions of Postwar Abstract Art: Calligraphy and Metaphysics," *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, Alexandra Munroe, ed., New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2009, p. 152. ⁴ Yoko Ono, all comments from a telephone interview with the author, Jan. 23, 2009. ⁵ Alison Knowles, all comments from a telephone interview with the author, Jan. 23, 2009. ⁶ Laurie Anderson, all comments from a telephone interview with the author, Jan. 22, 2009. ⁷ From *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, Barbara Rose, ed., Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1975, pp. 82-83; cited in Alexandra Munroe, "Art of Perceptual Experience: Pure Abstraction and Ecstatic Minimalism," *The Third Mind*, p. 287. ⁸ Robert Irwin, in conversation with Alexandra Munroe, New York, Jan. 10, 2009; reported to the author by Munroe.

"The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989" is currently on view at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York [Jan. 30-Apr. 19]. Its 439-page catalogue features essays by 10 international scholars.

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Above, Linda Mary Montano: *Mitchell's Death*, 1979, black-and-white video, 23 minutes.

Top, Jackson Pollock: *Seven Red Paintings*, ca. 1950, six oils on canvas and one enamel on canvas, each approx. 21 inches high. Private Collection, Berlin. © Pollock-Krasner Foundation/ARS.

Right, June 2008 raga performance in La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's *Dream House* environment, 1962-present. Courtesy MELA Foundation, New York. Photo Jung Hee Choi.

