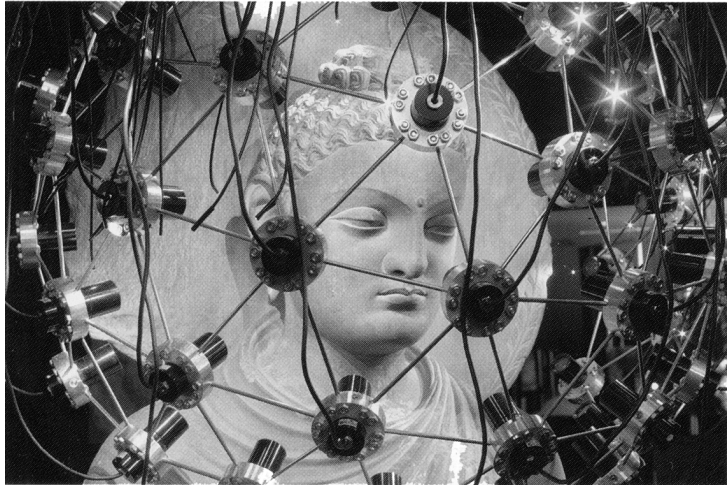


**The Asian persona so frequently—and sanctimoniously—invoked in “Fever Variations” was not Asian in the broad sense at all. It was East Asian, in an idealized, self-exoticized version.**



Detail of Michael Joo's multimedia installation *Bodhi Obfuscatus* (Gwangju), 2006.

artist Dove Bradshaw offered *Six Continents* (2003/06), six cone-shaped mounds of various minerals slowly dripped upon by water from suspended Pyrex funnel-beakers. Korean-born Lee Ufan painted three soft-edged gray rectangles, each modulated in tone from light to dark, on three adjoining white walls. The quartet of four-panel canvases that make up Japanese artist Hiroshi Senju's “Waterfall” series (2006) evoke, with their smoky drips on brownish-gray backgrounds, both traditional air-and-water scroll images and Pat Steir's large-scale paintings on the same theme. Vong Phaophanit (Laos/UK) presented an exquisite floor installation composed of six uniform waves of rice grains with five long tubes of red neon nestled in the troughs.

An anomaly in the midst of this typical fare was Jacquelynn Baas's section of Fluxus-related works by 22 artists, drawn largely from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection at the Cranbrook Art Museum. Even though the entire “Unfolding Asian Stories” chapter was billed as “diachronic” in structure, setting up a dialogue between Eastern culture past and present (including the influence of Zen on the West), this intrusion of golden oldies by Duchamp, Cage, Maciunas, Paik, Ben, Ono, Brecht, Spoerri, Filliou, etc., felt misplaced and a bit tired. Yes, as Baas points out in her essay, Fluxus had important Asian members such as Mieko Shiomi; yes, many of its Western participants were deeply affected by Taoism and other Eastern philosophies, often via the influence of Duchamp and Cage; and, yes, Fluxus remains a conceptual resource for many artists today. But context mat-

ters. To explore such historical links is why people visit museum shows like the superb Dada survey recently mounted at MOMA [see *A.i.A.*, June/July '06], not why some viewers elect to fly 12,000 miles for a contemporary art biennial.

Many works in the first part of the show dealt directly with Asian cultural heritage and identity. Xu Bing, Chinese-born but long resident in the U.S., displayed a “shadow” version of Korean master Huh Baek-ryun's *Landscape after Rainfall* (1947). On the front of a 32½-foot-wide scrim is what looks like a vastly enlarged traditional Eastern landscape painting; on the other side, however, a tangle of branches, straw and weeds spreads across the floor, with bits strategically tarred to the back of the scrim to create the gray-toned pseudo-ink picture on the recto plane—a compelling metaphor for the messy reality that often lies behind such spiritualized images.

In a similar vein, Jitish Kalal showed seven large lightbox photos of *roti*, the flat panbread staple from his native India, progressively eaten away to resemble the phases of the moon. Korea's Lee Sookyung glued together discarded fragments of broken traditional-style ceramics to form the irregular hybrid vessels of *Translated Vases* (2002). In *Mobile Landscape* (2006) by Kim Jong-ku, also from Korea, a wall-projected video image seems to depict—in time-honored Eastern fashion—a sweep of hills and



One of Dove Bradshaw's *Six Continents*, 2003/06, 100-lb. salt mound, glass funnel, water.



Zhao Xiang Yuan & Song Dong: *Waste Not*, 2005, clothes, dishware, furniture and other household items accumulated by Song Dong's mother over the past 50 years.

blank-space valleys; but, instead of ink on paper or silk, the pictorial medium turns out to be piles of steel powder strewn on the floor before a low-lying camera. David Hammons's *Praying to Safety* (1997) features two kneeling Buddha figures, each with hands pressed together in prayer, joined by a taut thread bearing a safety pin suspended at midpoint. Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê's *The Headless Buddha* (1998), an obvious riff on Nam June Paik's classic *TV Buddha* (1974), has the head of a Buddha statue perched on a pedestal, seemingly contemplating a lightbox image of a headless Buddha-statue body. Chen Chieh-Jen, from Taiwan, presented *Lingchi: Echoes of a Historical Photograph* (2002), a three-screen, black-and-white video installation that reenacts—in slow-moving, highly ritualized fashion—the execution by repeated cutting of a prisoner in early 20th-century China.

Chen's film, mesmerizing and horrifically beautiful, might well be seen as a meditation on the refinement of cruelty in a particular time and place, or in the human psyche in general. Instead, it was woefully mischaracterized by catalogue essayist Chia Chi Jason Wang as “a metaphor of the power relations between weak and strong under the hegemony of the First World, with its designs to project globalization.” The author somehow arrives at this interpretation despite the fact that there is not a single Western face in the video, that the now abandoned *lingchi* (sometimes known as “slicing,” “death by a thousand cuts” or “death by dismemberment”) was an indigenous Chinese punishment that long predated (and ended before) contemporary globalization, and that the practice so revolted early Western visitors that photos of it were circulated, occasionally in postcard form, as self-serving “evidence” of the Far East's moral perversion. Such historical facts and complications are clearly of no interest to Chen's commentator, whose present-day anti-capitalist, anti-Western agenda perfectly reflected the underlying political bias of the Biennale as a whole.

Even in this esthetically diverse first chapter of the exhibition, the social-activist art on display varied little in ideological content. At the rude and energetic extreme was Thai artist Vasan