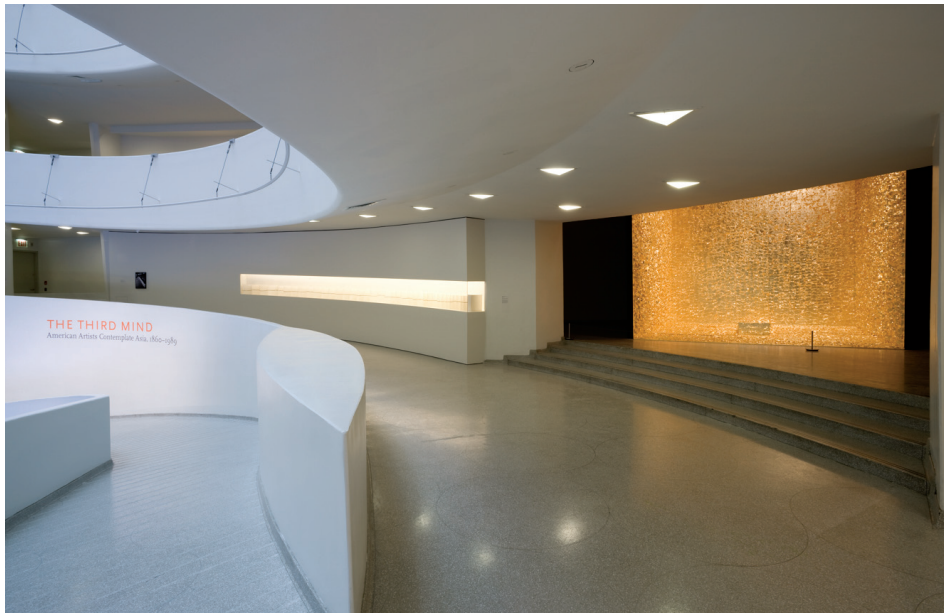


Reflections on *The Third Mind*

Alexandra Munroe

The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989 was a large-scale exhibition accompanied by a scholarly book of the same name, a series of live performances, a website, audio guide, and public programs organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and presented there in winter 2009. Many years in the making, it explored a set of ideas around the vast, unruly, and often problematic concept of “Asian influence” on visual art of the United States. Europe has long been recognized as the font of mainstream American art movements, but the show explored an alternative lineage aligned with America’s Pacific aspect. Asia’s “influence” on such influential artists and writers as James McNeill Whistler, John La Farge, Arthur Wesley Dow, Ezra Pound, Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, John Cage, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, and Adrian Piper has been well-documented and treated in previous studies. *The Third Mind* (Figures 1–3) made the case that this influence was not occasional or eccentric, but was rather a continuous and complex undercurrent that courses through the development of early modern to post-war to neo-avant-garde art. That the nature of artists’ work with these forces varied widely and that “Asia” meant different things to different artists at different periods should not discourage our critical and historical analyses of this profound lineage of ideas, events, and people, it concluded.

We fully expected *The Third Mind* to raise debate, even controversy, and we welcome signs that, although the exhibition has closed, this ambitious project and the substantial exhibition catalogue are continuing to stir important questions across disciplines and area studies. By its nature (a finite



1. Entrance to *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2009, with view of James Lee Byars's *The Death of James Lee Byars*, 1982/1994, made of gold leaf, crystal, and Plexiglas. Photo by David Heald, courtesy The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

physical space, among other things) an exhibition, like a textbook, requires a curator to make difficult decisions about what to highlight and what to leave out. Thus many of the questions we wrestled with and even some of the criticisms later directed at the show can illuminate key areas ripe for further scholarly inquiry.

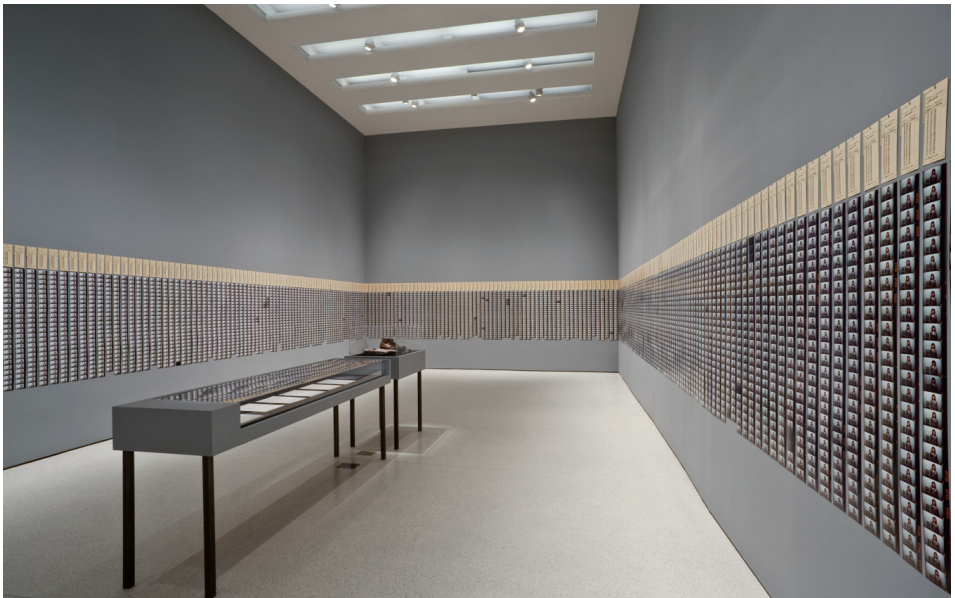
Literature

Working together, colleagues inside and outside the Guggenheim helped me to shape the story of American artists' exposure to Asian images and themes as a cultural, intellectual, and political history of how select ideas were mediated, interpreted, and used.¹ Without question, *The Third Mind* built its narrative around the role that literature played in this mediation, and the art-historical narrative throughout elucidated the key texts and writers artists learned the most from. Throughout our period of study, translations, commentaries, and adaptations of Asian philosophy, metaphysics, poetry, and aesthetics composed by such towering figures as Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, Arthur Wesley Dow, Ernest Fenollosa, Carl Jung, Thomas Merton, Ezra Pound, Nancy Wilson Ross, Gary Snyder, D. T. Suzuki, Thoreau, and Arthur Waley were widely used by visual artists. Artists' encounters with these key figures, either through friendship, a master-disciple relationship, or their writings, were a centerpiece of the exhibition's narrative. The patterns of this intellectual history are suggested in Ikuyo Nakagawa's chronology and bibliography compiled for the book accompanying the show, and *The Third Mind* used such

texts as the primary point of encounter with Asia. Asian readings also provided artists with a logic of political resistance to counter what was perceived as the West's moral and spiritual decline. Thomas Merton, writing on the Bhagavad Gita more than a 100 years after Thoreau, claimed: "It brings to the West a salutary reminder that our highly activist and one-sided culture is faced with a crisis that may end in self-destruction because it lacks an authentic metaphysical consciousness. Without such depth, our moral and political protestations are just so much verbiage."²



2. Paul Kos, *Sound of Ice Melting*, 1970. Two 25-pound blocks of ice, eight boom microphone stands, eight microphones, mixer, amplifier, two large speakers, and cables, dimensions variable. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2009. Collection of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo by David Heald, courtesy The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.



3. Tehching Hsieh, *Punching the Time Clock on the Hour, One Year Performance, April 11, 1980–April 11, 1981*. Installation of documentary photographs and original performance relics, including poster, documents, 366 time cards, 366 24-hour images, 16 mm film, time clock, 16 mm movie camera, uniform, shoes, and footprints, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. Photo by David Heald, courtesy The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

Consequently, this project was not about Asia per se. Rather, it sought foremost to illuminate the range of approaches that artists and writers used to collect ideas for their creative strategies, and to interrogate and critique their own conditioned worldviews. This last point offers a threshold for deeper examination: to elaborate on how artists used the East as critique of the West, and in a subversive alliance with the objects of American imperialism in the Pacific and, more widely, across Asia.

Orientalist Tropes

Throughout our planning, execution, and presentation of *The Third Mind*, our challenge was to remain critical of the process of constructing the East as a reductive suit of aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural concepts. Skeptics were quick to assume that we would be guilty of perpetuating Orientalist tropes. In fact, we inverted them. As I stated in the catalogue's introduction, while the significance of Edward Said's (1978) theory is far-reaching, its pejorative cast over the entire enterprise of Western studies, commentaries, and creative interpretations of Oriental subjects has become problematic.³ Said's focus on the Middle East (a reflection of his Palestinian origin) is only partially relevant to South Asia and, in one important regard, fundamentally inapplicable to East Asia and Southeast Asia, where colonial and imperial dominion was most brutally exercised by Japan, not the West. Further, as J. J. Clarke argued, Said's critique of Western representations of the East, wherein Western knowledge of the Orient "has generally proceeded . . . from cultural antipathy," does not encompass romantic or positive attitudes toward the Orient and what they produced. Clarke proposed an "affirmative orientalism, seeking to show that the West endeavored to integrate Eastern thought into its own intellectual concerns in a manner which, on the face of it, cannot be fully understood in terms of 'power' and 'domination.'"⁴ For our appreciation of the rich applications of Asian art and thought in modern American art, Clarke's argument resonated.

Furthermore, those recent works that apply Said's critique to India or China overwhelmingly emphasize nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature, philosophy, and religious studies. The subject of Orientalism and modern Western art, and in particular modern American art, has been largely ignored. Finally, his thesis does not engage the influence of Orientalism upon the self-awareness of the very Asians it purports to describe. Okakura Kakuzō (also known as Tenshin), author of *The Ideals of the East* (1903) and *The Book of Tea* (1906), and his contemporary Swami Vivekananda, the leading disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and founder of Vedanta societies in Europe and America, are cases in point. As Richard King and Harry Harootunian describe in their essays in *The Third Mind*, these influential thinkers promoted the particular spirituality of Japanese and Indian culture, respectively, in terms that

were formulated by Western Orientalists as a curative for the nihilism and materialism of encroaching modernization and westernization. This history is what Bernard Faure calls “secondary Orientalism.”⁵

Of course, arguments in this vein of intellectual history could not be “displayed” in the show itself; they were developed in the publication which grew to be more of a book than a conventional exhibition catalogue. My hope is that the book will become a lasting source of discussion among those whose lives are dedicated to the history of ideas, and that Orientalism, affirmative Orientalism, and secondary Orientalism inspire keen revisionist studies both in the academy and museums.

Goals and Limits

No one faulted *The Third Mind* for its lack of ambition. Featuring some 270 works by more than 100 artists, it explored how American art evolved through a process of appropriation and integration of Asian sources that developed from the 1860s through the 1980s, when globalization came to eclipse earlier, more deliberate modes of cultural transmission and reception.

The title we chose, *The Third Mind*, refers to a “cut-ups” work by the Beat writers William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, whose cult of spontaneity in art and life drew inspiration from Asian attitudes, or perceived attitudes. This manuscript, which was on display, is composed of random texts and images that evoke the eclectic yet purposeful method by which American artists often appropriated material from Asia to create new forms, structures, and meanings in their work. Misreadings, mediations, denials, and imaginary projections emerge as important iterations of this creative process. Some artists identified with non-Western art and thought precisely to subvert and critique what they saw as the spiritually bankrupt capitalist West. Others culled alternative, East–West identities from Transcendentalism, Theosophy, Jung’s aspirations of the collective unconscious, and New Age movements preaching the perennial vitality of Asia’s spiritual psychology in a global age. Still others simply extracted and freely enlisted what served their particular artistic impulses. Grounded in documentary evidence of the artists’ encounters with Asia (through travel, literature, artifacts, friendships, and/or spiritual practice), the exhibition showed how artists working in America adapted Eastern ideas and art forms to create not only new styles of art, but more importantly, a new theoretical definition of the contemplative experience and self-transformative role of art itself.

Critics were unanimous that the show was “long overdue”; they were less convinced by its “sprawling” and “unwieldy” scale. (The public was undaunted; an unprecedented number of visitors returned two or three times.) Although it spanned

120 years and was installed across 35,000 square feet, *The Third Mind* was not comprehensive, exhaustive, or definitive. Exhibitions are defined by the spaces they occupy, and decisions for what to include are subject to a variety of variable conditions. Hundreds more artists could have been included and weren't, because we knew that encyclopedias don't make good shows. Early on, we thus decided that architecture, design, ceramics, fashion, and popular art were beyond this project's scope.

Opening with the late-nineteenth-century Aesthetic movement, *The Third Mind* illuminated the Asian influences shaping such major movements as abstract art, conceptual art, minimalism, and the neo-avant-garde as they unfolded in New York and on the West Coast. It also presented select developments in modern poetry, music, and dance-theater. Organized chronologically and thematically, each of the show's seven sections explored interconnected collectives of artists who shared specific aesthetic strategies and rhetoric derived from Asian sources, which shaped their conceptual approach to art-making.⁶

Pacific Sound

Critics noted the importance of West Coast artists and avant-garde centers in *The Third Mind*. This was no coincidence, as the Pacific coast was a focus of my research from the start. One such center was Berkeley in the late 1950s, where La Monte Young emerged as an originator of Minimal music with compositions based on a series of long sustained tones set in a unique harmonic language. As early as 1958, Young analyzed the slow-tempo structures of classical Japanese *gagaku* orchestration and drone harmonics found in Hindustani (North Indian) *raga* vocal styles and tamboura tuning and applied them to his investigations of the tuning system called just intonation. Classical Indian musical concepts of *svara* (the entire dimension of pitch and its potential effect on the listener) and *tala* (the organization of cyclic structures that facilitate improvisation) reinforced Young's concern for pure intonation, an expanded unfolding of time, and organically evolving improvisational techniques.

In 1962, Young formed a group later called The Theatre of Eternal Music whose first members included Terry Riley and Marian Zazeela. They later became disciples of and collaborated with the master Hindustani *raga* vocalist Pandit Pran Nath from 1970 until his death in 1996. Pran Nath taught, "You are the sound: the sound is in you." The concept of a work that was eternal led Young and Zazeela to evolve *Dream House*, a continuous electronic sound environment in luminous fields of colored light (Figure 4). Working closely with the artists and their sound and light engineers, the Guggenheim constructed a *Dream House* environment that occupied an entire annex gallery space of some 4,000 square feet. Zazeela's work uses intense light focused

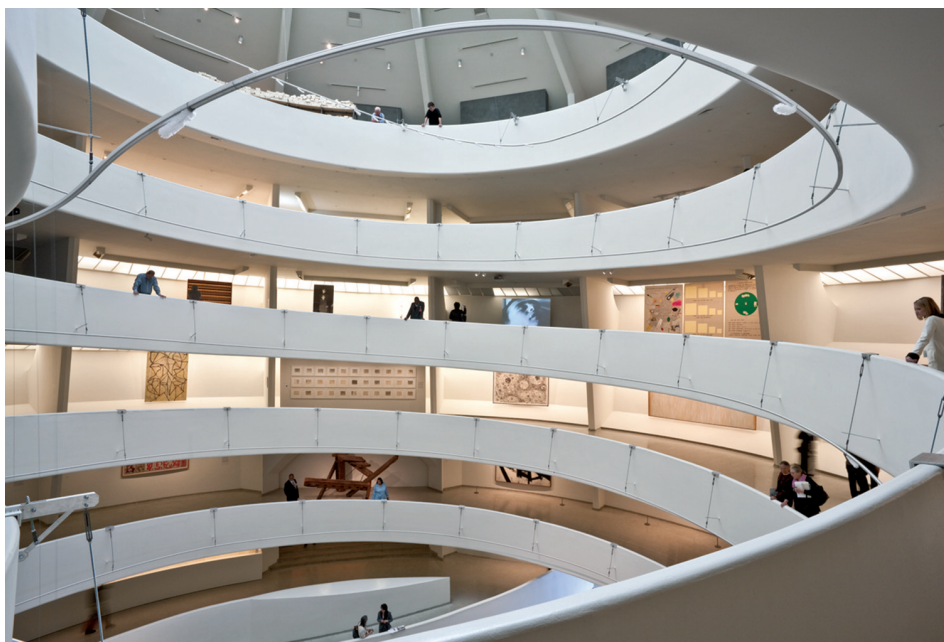


4. La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, *Dream House*, 1962–present. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2009. Photo by David Heald, courtesy The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

through dichroic filters projected onto sculptural forms to create optical effects that alternatively dissolve and substantiate the contours and shadows. These effects are harmonically integrated with Young’s musical environment of periodic sound waveforms to create an all-encompassing immersion in the material of sound. The *Dream House* is a full-sensory light and sound environment that can transform the listener’s psychic state into what Young calls “the drone-state-of-mind.” Visitors were asked to take off their shoes and invited to enter the space; some stayed for hours. Three live performances of Young and Zazeela’s Just Alap Raga Ensemble were staged there during the course of the show (featuring Jung Hee Choi, Da’ud Constant, voices; Charles Curtis, cello; Jon Catler, electric sustainer guitar; and Naren Budhkar, tabla).

Some critics pointed to a lack of Indian influence in the show, perhaps unaware of the equivalent importance we placed on the arts of sound and poetry—as central to our thesis as the “visual art” of painting. From Thoreau onward, India’s hold over the American imagination came through its metaphysical poetry (the Vedic texts) and sacred music (*raga*); the catalogue also examines the influence of Vivekenanda and Coomeraswamy in some depth. Yet, the imagination of India in American art and culture—and the reasons for its perceived marginalization—definitely calls for greater research.

Critics and the public alike noted the predominance of East Asian influences in the history of American art. This should come as no surprise for anyone with a basic knowledge of U.S. history. My catalogue introduction frames America’s



5. Installation view of *The Third Mind*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2009. Photo by David Heald, courtesy The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

encounter with Asia squarely within its geopolitical history as a Pacific power.⁷ Japanese art and Zen Buddhism dominate in part because America's political and economic ties with Japan were historically stronger than those with China or India, the other prime source nations. Also, Protestant ethics resonated with Japanese disembodied "minimalist" aesthetics for the same reasons they clashed with fleshy manifestations of India's Hindu pantheon. Asian immigration, especially on the West Coast, also characterizes America's experience. For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the primary waves of immigrants came from southern China and Japan to labor in the mining, railroad, and agricultural developments of the Western frontier. These migrations changed the fabric of American society and nurtured artists' encounters with Asia. South Asian immigration is more recent phenomenon, and would have played a greater role if our scope had extended into the 1990s and early 2000s.

Travel and Globalization

This brings us to the question of periodization. We chose to make the year 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, the end date for our historical survey. All the exhibition artists were born before 1960. For the generations covered in this exhibition and catalogue, foreign travel was a self-transformative experience. Their process of research was intentionally and deeply internalized. Travel was part escape, part enlightenment, and grounded in an Orientalist tradition that sought self-betterment through the

selective appropriation of ideas, practices, relationships, and material artifacts that represented an alternative and superior Other. After 1990, artists traveled less for personal research and far more as participants in the biennales and other international shows that have proliferated around the globe over the last two decades. This development has paralleled globalization and the consequent shift in the nature of how knowledge is transmitted. Another factor in this shift, which supports why the exhibition (Figure 5) ends when it does, is the rise of post-colonial theory and the Orientalist discourse. The introduction of critique, which defined the process of Orientalism, served to historicize the phenomenon, and thereby to effect its end. That said, there is an enormous amount of important work to be done in sorting out manifestations of Asian art and culture, including identity politics among Asian Americans, in the context of globalization. These issues were squarely beyond the scope of this show but offer rich directions for future research and analyses.

Response and Challenges

Some raised concern about how the exhibition contributed (or not) to the general public's understanding of "American art" and "Asia." Were we "essentializing" the subject, or was Asia too absent? In fact, the Guggenheim hired an expert museum evaluation team, Randi Korn & Associates, to review visitor experiences. (The show's total attendance was 208,995, or 3,029 per day, over 11 weeks.) This report, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, revealed that the majority of visitors were persuaded by how "the exhibition demonstrated Asian influences on American artists" and "understood that this is a *new* idea or *new* paradigm in art history."⁸ According to Randi Korn, these findings are extraordinary: most visitors to most shows don't come away as changed by what they saw. The report states:

These visitors explained that the theme of the exhibition is Asian influences on American art, and most were able to elaborate, talking about Eastern philosophy and religion, minimalism, loss of ego, contemplation, beauty, etc. These visitors were very enthusiastic about the exhibition, and many of them were surprised by a new discovery or new way of looking at American art; for example, quite a few said they had never thought about the influence of calligraphy on abstract expressionism or were amazed at the connections among all the artists and Asia. Many of them believed they would look at American art through a slightly different lens as a result of seeing the exhibition. A few even said they developed a new appreciation for contemporary art as a result of thinking about Asian influences and ideas. All except one said they would now think about American art with a heightened awareness of artists' intentions.⁹

Much remains to be done, but I am pleased with what the Guggenheim show accomplished. The project aimed high: to trace how the art, literature, and philosophy of Asia were transmitted, received, and transformed within American cultural and intellectual currents, influencing the articulation of new visual and conceptual languages. In addressing these challenges, I believe that it revealed some critical fault lines for further investigation. I hope that the information and the arguments raised in the exhibition will live on, not only through the book, website, and memories of curatorial and visitor experiences, but in a vigorous inter-disciplinary dialogue, across the fields of art history, literature, music, and area studies, about American art's Asian lineage and its meanings.

Notes

1. The realization of all these components of *The Third Mind* would not have been possible without the support and collaboration of many colleagues. I especially acknowledge the contributions of Vivien Greene, curator of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century art at the Guggenheim, who curated the opening section, *Aestheticism and Japan*; research associate Ikuyo Nakagawa; and members of our academic advisory committee.
2. Thomas Merton, "The Significance of the Bhagavad-gita" (1968), in Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 349.
3. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1991), 3. Said's work expands upon earlier works that critique the Western construction and imaginary of Asian culture and its people such as Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Discovery of India and the East, 1680–1880*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (1950; New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) and John M. Steadman, *The Myth of Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1970).
4. Said (1978) is quoted in J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997), 8. Clarke also explained his position there: "Where Said, drawing upon Michel Foucault's work concerning the relationship between knowledge and power, saw Orientalism as a 'master narrative' of Western Imperialism which constructs and controls its subjugated other, I shall portray it as tending to confront the structures of Western knowledge and power and to engage with Eastern ideas in ways which are more creative, more open-textured, and more reciprocal than are allowed for in Said's critique."
5. See Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5–9.
6. The accompanying book follows this chronological structure with chapters that correspond to the show's section titles. These are: *Aestheticism and Japan: The Cult of the Orient*; *Landscapes of the Mind: New Conceptions of Nature*; *Ezra Pound, Modern Poetry, and Dance Theater*; *The Asian Dimensions of Postwar Abstract Art: Calligraphy and Metaphysics*; *Buddhism and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Cage Zen, Beat Zen, and Zen*; *Art of Perceptual Experience: Pure Abstraction and Ecstatic Minimalism*; and *Performance Art and the Experiential Present*. See Alexandra Munroe, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009), appendices by Ikuyo Nakagawa.
7. The United States colonized the Philippine islands in 1898, had important interests in the outcome of Sino-Japanese War of 1895 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, and sided with Chiang Kai-shek in the Guomindang's resistance to the Japanese invasion of China and occupation of Manchukuo in the 1930s. Asia's Pacific War escalated with Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. This strike against the U.S. Pacific fleet pulled the United States into World War II. Four years later, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan's surrender secured American hegemony once again in the region. While the Cold War is often cast as a conflict between Soviet spheres of influence and Western Europe and North America, the majority of military action took place on the Asian front. The U.S. occupation of Japan (1945–52) and

post-war security pacts with Japan, its central role in the Korean War (1950–53) and subsequent long-term military presence in South Korea, and its disastrous engagement in the Vietnam War (ca. 1961–75) all attest to the enormity of Asia in the history and psyche of the American people.

8. Summative Evaluation: *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989*. Prepared for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum by Randi Korn & Associates, Alexandria, VA (April 2009). Unpublished report.

9. Ibid.