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results in an odd silence regarding recent threads in scholarship that have helped unsettle the distinction between figure and ground, subject and object, agent and recipient, such as ecology, new materialism, object-oriented ontology, and queer theory.

Even more than formalism, though, it seems that philology may be the methodological throughline of the book. Occasionally, as with the discussion of *potentia* and *potestas* in chapter 2, this approaches a tendency that the author identifies among German-language scholarship: *Sprachzauber*, which can be translated roughly as ‘word magic’ (13). In taking up philology as a methodological leitmotif, the author wishes ‘to lay emphasis on the very impulse to formulate words for grounds. This drive suggests that writers on art in the Renaissance were engaged in diagnosing the conditions of the painting medium, its fundamental elements and potential for pictorial representation, through the ground, and the multiplicity of available terms suggests a chorus of voices’ (46–7). However, the criteria for participating in that chorus are unexplained.

Groundwork is cleverly written and draws attention to an element of early modern painting that is often overlooked. It is clearly the product of a scholar who has spent a long time looking, attending to the subtle variations of surface pattern and paint application, and in an act of scholarly generosity, Kim helps the reader learn to attend to Renaissance paintings in new ways.

Note

- 1 See, among others: Millard Meiss, *Giovanni Bellini's St. Francis in the Frick Collection*, Princeton, 1964; Jennifer Fletcher, ‘The Provenance of Bellini's Frick St Francis’, *The Burlington Magazine*, 114: 829, 1972, 206–215; John Fleming, *From Bonaventure to Bellini: An Essay in Franciscan Exegesis*, Princeton, 1982; and Emanuele Lugli, ‘Between Form and Representation: The Frick St Francis’, *Art History*, 32: 1, 2009, 21–51.

Elected Affinities

Tausif Noor

The Geometries of Afro Asia: Art Beyond Solidarity, by Joan Kee, Oakland: University of California Press, 2023, 320 pp., 70 col. and 34 b. & w. illus., paperback, £30.

In 1981, under the aegis of a fellowship from the U.S.-Japan Friendship Commission, the artist Howardena Pindell spent seven months in Japan, traveling widely across the nation. Recounting her visit in the feminist journal *Heresies* in 1983, Pindell candidly described the ‘intense stress’ brought about by her near-constant experience of racist ridicule and her struggle to learn the formalities and customs of her host country.¹ As a means of continuing her work in the face of self-doubt, Pindell drew inspiration from the ‘traditional Japanese way of organising space, images, and colour’. Among the fruits of this labour was *Autobiography: Japan (Kokuzo Bosatsu)*, 1982, a collage of generic tourist postcards that Pindell cut into strips and rearranged to form a pleated and fanned out pattern and then painted over (plate 1). A panoply of landscapes expanding outwards from a central point, the collage swirls a painted image of the titular Buddhist deity together with fragments of foliage and sky. The work says little of the cultural heritage of Japan and even less of its maker, a Black American woman. Rather, the collage, with its emphasis on the repetition and mutability of its constituent parts offers a kaleidoscopic but nevertheless generic image of ‘Japan’ as envisioned by and through Pindell. As such, *Autobiography: Japan (Kokuzo Bosatsu)* can be regarded, as Joan Kee argues in her latest monograph, as representative of the potentialities of Afro Asia.

What is Afro Asia? Kee begins by considering what Afro Asia is not: it is neither a ‘fixed geography’, [5] nor an ‘institutionalised’ term of identification such as Black or Asian American [35]. The geopolitical origins of the term arise from mutual struggles for self-determination by the formerly colonised peoples of Africa and Asia, whose disavowals of Cold War polarities were articulated at the 1955 Bandung Conference. This brief historicisation shapes the loose but effective contours Kee establishes in order to define Afro Asia: ‘inescapably aesthetic’ [11], porous and a yet-to-be realised project. For Kee, Afro Asia’s abeyance



I Howardena Pindell, *Autobiography: Japan (Kokuzo Bosatsu)*, 1982, Mixed media collage on paper, 17½ × 15 × 3½ inches. Photo: Courtesy of Garth Greenan Gallery.

is central to its function as an epistemology formed through encounters between people and objects. Afro-Asia-as-method supplies the book's most provocative

and compelling argument: that the art of Afro Asia models the possibility of mutual coexistence without requiring solidarity amongst its constituent groups, and in so doing, makes room for art's sovereignty.

Less rigid than autonomy, sovereignty hinges on the potential for art to command 'uncoerced' [6]

attention, liberated particularly from the Manichean cleaving of ‘with us’ or ‘against us’ that demands for solidarity so often produce. In shifting attention to art’s sovereignty vis-à-vis the contingencies of Afro Asia, Kee urges readers to consider what art may offer beyond the platitudes of ‘inclusivity’ or the flattening enterprise of terms such as the ‘global contemporary’. As well-intentioned as these rewritings of the art historical canon may be, Kee underscores that they nevertheless reify the dominance of Euro-American perspective as the benchmark of aesthetic achievement. Afro Asia allows for a different history of modernism, one based on the logic of the commons rather than the rote cataloguing of pseudomorphologies along national lines [10]. Following the Russian formalist literary critic Viktor Shlovsky, Kee asserts that the goal of this endeavour is not to domesticate the unknown [34], but to experience art in such a way as to allow for more propulsive and perhaps speculative histories that take the ‘global majority’ as their starting point.

How does one engender such an experience and write such histories? Drawing comparisons across different mediums of art and attending to the pleasures of ‘form as an open question’, [49] Kee traces comparisons across the art of the Black and Asian diasporas that transcend the merely symbolic. She borrows a litany of terms from mathematics such as adjacency, coincidence and topology, to help readers understand the operations of Afro Asia as matters of actual and imagined dialogues and asymptotic movements between Black and Asian artists, artworks and artistic communities. The conceit also helps readers navigate the eclectic trove of case studies Kee has assembled across the book’s five chapters: paintings, sculptures, photographs, fabric works, dance performances and films made from the 1960s onward. These works were selected because their facture and reception resist easy categorisation, and indeed move beyond solidarity as an aspiration for creative production.

In the first chapter, Kee examines the artistic work and creative friendship of Mel Edwards and Ronald Miyashiro in 1960s Los Angeles. Reading their respective spiky, hand-forged, reassembled metal-and-wood sculptures against the grain of influence, Kee argues that these diminutively scaled but monumentally affective works pose questions of real and implied violence, spirituality and visibility. For Edwards and Miyashiro’s works to be so productively compared, sharing common ground and purpose but not

beholden to declared statements of solidarity, elegantly demonstrates how form can resist predetermined meanings based on racial or geographical origins.

Turning in the second chapter to photography produced in the context of military occupation in Korea and Japan, Kee elucidates how shared experience, whether from self-declared vows between individuals and groups, or ‘mutual and parallel experiences of coercion, alienation, and harm’ [103], has enabled the conceptualisation of Afro Asia as an ongoing and coeval process forged through intimacy. Here, Kee presents Joo Myung-Duck’s photographs of the multiracial children of U.S. servicemen and Korean women, and Mao Ishikawa’s images of the Okinawa public and domestic spaces where Black and Asian bodies mingled, as case studies of resistance to claims of documentary photography’s universal humanism. Instead, Kee accounts for the ways in which dynamics of consent and participation can produce an undue obligation that photographs ‘mean something’ [99] or simply reproduce reality. She points to how the play of light and shadow, which constitutes a photograph’s very existence, structures intimacy between human figures. In both cases, Kee underscores that the affinities of Afro Asia as lived by its constituent subjects far exceed matters of geopolitics and cannot simply or only be reduced to the logics of submission and domination implied by war.

The third chapter brings together the mixed media practices of David Hammons, Howardena Pindell, Faith Ringgold, Barbara Chase-Riboud and Betye Saar, highlighting how their works and methodologies contest both the binary of tradition-modernity and the totalising homology of hybridity. It is here that Kee’s exhortation to ‘embra[ce] [the] uncharted, capacious, and sometimes treacherous possibility’ [143] offered by ‘Asia as Black method’ [133] is particularly compelling. Her analysis of the tensions upheld by the surfaces and supports of these works produces an expansive understanding of modernism, wherein ‘East’ and ‘West’ are not fixed and diametrically opposed, but are coordinates for a prospective non-Euro American history of art. Here, Afro Asia’s irreducibility as a geographic marker extends also to its resistance to being marshalled as a claim for the virtues of hybridity or diversity; these works do not make Black or Asian cultures more readily legible, nor do they affirm any preconceptions of tradition bounded by racial or national categories.

This trajectory of nonaffirmation continues in the fourth chapter, which examines the contingent nature

of collaborations between Black and Asian artists. The incompatibility of Blondell Cummings, Senga Nengudi and Yasunao Tone's collaborative performance *Blind Date* (1982), for example, one which Tone considered unsuccessful because of the 'different intensities' (176) of the artists involved, strikes a contrast with the extensive monochrome paintings made jointly by Glenn Ligon and Byron Kim and the films of Wu Tsang and Nana Oforiatta-Ayim. The latter examples emphasise how the formal tensions internal to Black and Asian collaborations can rework the concept of collaboration itself, not as transactional relationships that generate feelings of community, but unpredictable formulations that deal with 'attraction, repulsion, distance, and proximity' [207]. By accounting for these unexpected outcomes as part of the process, such works sidestep morality and multiculturalism as requisites for collaboration.

Kee concludes her study of Afro Asian geometries by engaging with the contemporary phenomenon of Chinese investment in Africa and the anxious accusations of neocolonialism that this relation has produced. Whether understood through Moffat Takadiwa's witty sculptures made from scavenged, Chinese-made electronics or performances and photographs by Nobukho Nqaba that make use of the ubiquitous plaid-patterned 'China bags' as metonyms for the complex and uneven patterns of production and consumption by those within the global majority, the materiality of these artworks shifts the focus from economic and political power relations as the sole frame for understanding Afro China. These artistic negotiations do not discount the impact of hegemony on cultural production, Kee notes, but underscore how the 'global' is all too often equated with assimilation into Euro American frameworks and ideals [220].

For Kee to be able to summon so many precise examples from a vast catalogue of cultural production is a feat in itself and testifies to the seemingly infinite potentials of Afro Asia. That these examples are supported by a rigorous array of citations from disciplines as varied as postcolonial and cultural studies, philosophy and embodied cognition demonstrates the portability of Afro Asia as a method. Indeed, while historical and cultural studies of Afro Asia have proliferated in the past decade, it has heretofore been absent from serious study in the field of art history.² Readers may notice that concepts and vocabulary from Kee's earlier volumes, including the bracketing of contextualisation and influence in favour of serious engagement with the aesthetics of modernity, the

attention to art's imbrication with the law, have informed her framework for understanding Afro Asia. In buoyant prose, with great sensitivity to her objects and the attention they demand, Kee skewers the reductive pieties and rigid teloi that have arguably left the discipline of art history at a kind of impasse, hovering fitfully around baggy definitions of the 'global'. The promise of Afro Asia is far greater than what methodology or discipline can allow and the urgency for recognising art's sovereignty much greater still.

Notes

- 1 Howardena Pindell, 'An American Black Woman in a Japanese Garden', *Heresies* 4: 15, February 1983, 54–55. Accessed via Howardena Pindell Papers, MCA Chicago, <https://pindell.mcachicago.org/the-howardena-pindell-papers/an-american-black-woman-artist-in-a-japanese-garden/>.
- 2 For instance, Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen, eds. *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans*, Duke University Press, 2008; Yuchiro Onishi's *Transpacific Racism: Afro-Asian Solidarity in 20th Century Black America, Japan, and Okinawa*, New York University Press, 2013; Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination*, Duke University Press, 2014.