MS Radhika SUBRAMANIAM:

It's late afternoon on a Sunday, but it's about time you heard from an Asian woman, I think. I want to thank Dr Ho and the Home Affairs Bureau for their very kind invitation to this forum and for their incredible hospitality over the past few days. It's been a very educational, informative few days for me and I'm grateful to all of you out there in the audience. I know in New York, where I work, it would be very hard to get a turnout like this on a warm Sunday afternoon. So I'm very appreciative of your attendance.

East Meets West, so that was the title of the panel and it intrigued me that this is a session at the Asia Cultural Co-operation Forum and that for me, from India, via New York, I should meet people in Hong Kong via a panel where East meets West as opposed to East meeting East, but that too says something about the history of the concept of Asia, which was alluded to earlier this afternoon and the history of Asia, however we might understand it and its relationship to the West.

About a decade ago almost, when I was putting together a very large performance art event in Los Angeles and was working with collaborators there on the performing arts of Asia, we were coming back to Asia to look at different performers and try to consider whom we might invite and I was very keen at the time to invite people from Iran and from the Middle East, since that was the ambit of Asia and because Los Angeles has a very large Iranian population.

My colleagues in Los Angeles were very resistant to that idea. They said that Asia ends in Pakistan. In my imagination, as someone growing up in India, who grew up very much with imagery, with stories and with tales such as Arabian Nights, as much as Angkor Wat and Cambodia intermingled in an imagination of to whom you were connected, it seemed very strange to draw this border somewhere with the Indus. It is with this idea that Asia itself, or the East, however we might understand that and Prof Chang alluded to that earlier this afternoon, is in itself a concept, a construct that stands on incredibly shaky ground.

So I'm going to start with my pondering of the first question that I was given when asked to speak here and that was, is there still an East and a West? At the beginning, I just thought is there an East and a West?

And then I realised, no, the question actually asked is there still an East and a West? I'm not sure what that "still" might mean. Does that "still" refer to a hope that that chasm has been bridged, whatever those two sides of that equation might be? That there is no longer an East and a West. It's bridged. Is it still there? No, it isn't. So the hopeful answer would be no, it isn't.

Or does it hold to a sense of melancholy and nostalgia, a sense of loss? Is there still an East and a West? Is there still something that we can go back to and so it reminds me very much and I'm going to bring this theme up, because that's sort of what I want to talk about, that these identities as we're talking about them, whether we're looking at tradition and modern, East and West, India and Hong Kong, India and China, however you construct it, are constructed very much in relationship to each other. These are relational ideas, they are co-constructed in a process of translation. Of translation of us to the other of the self to the other. My sense of self very much exists because of my relationship to you.

One of the gifts of the 20th century to us was of course the dismantling of some very old oppositions of the Cold War, a dismantling of old boundaries that were the legacy of colonialism and with that passing some very new parameters were gifted to us. But one of the things that its did, especially in the last two decades of the 20th century, was give to us a notion of speed and an idea that everyone was connected through a network of globalised capital. "Technology", "capital", "globalisation", these were the buzz words. We all were interrelated, we were connected and it restored a new faith in some old notions, but in old notions that had very different moorings, ideas of internationalism, but not the internationalism that say Ban Dung had given the world, an internationalism that was a kind of shaky bridge between the first and second world, but a different kind of internationalism and with that some ideas of interculturalism, of the fact that new nations were diverse within themselves, of the fact that the metropol, which was now no longer really the metropol, had some very diverse populations within it, so the understanding of one's relationship to each other was supposed to be through these very exciting mobile ideas of the international.

As this very material side of the old order crumbled, these walls came tumbling down, and we were all very celebratory cheering Joshua, there

were also some very new discourses that had very much to do with boundary crossing, border crossing, Normanism, deterritorialisation, these were very much the discourse of the multicultural years, if you like, certainly in the United States, but also elsewhere, of understanding muddy, messy ideas and it was a celebration of migrant population sometimes in these contexts, but also a celebration of border zones where people come into contact with each other and in those last years, the 1980s and the 1990s of the 20th century, there was certainly a movement towards a new internationalism in art.

I know my colleague here was involved in some of the big festivals that were produced at the time. India certainly participated in producing some Festivals of India, but there were a lot of different festivals that were created at the time, which showcased, within a nationalist framework, but internationally a sense of new societies, new cultures with very eclectic diverse populations to each other.

Following from that, were also a new form of much more deterritorial internationalism and that was the Biennial format. Something that hasn't died yet. Something that was very much a visual art creation, the Biennials, the Triennials and this proliferation of Biennials and Triennials hasn't quite discontinued. Curiously, or perhaps not surprisingly, performing arts never quite had that kind of large festival format.

It's much harder to move bodies across borders no matter how much you celebrate the demise of those borders, it's much easier to move work, installations and the various other formats within which visual artwork takes place. But the important thing about these new formats of the festival and of Biennials and even of performing arts festivals was the creation of some new systems of cultural brokering, translation acquired a new energy, cultural translation in particular, but this was translation that came from a very different location, from the kind of translation work that, for example, the Cold War years spawned.

A type of deep entry, even the colonial years, if you will, a type of deep entry, long time spent, even if the reason for that long time spent in learning languages and in learning each other, whatever that might mean, was meant for a system of domination. This type of cultural translation

was meant for a mobile international circuit of art movement where you were provided with the little wall tag that quickly translated for you the programme notes that someone alluded to earlier, that translated very swiftly for you, provided you with enough of a framework that you were expected to understand.

This idea that context and translation could exist in these swift forming networks where you encountered people unmoored in a sense to their location, but seemingly re-mooring themselves in a variety of different places, was a very new phenomenon, certainly of the 1990s. I started thinking about the project of Connect, what was to become the journal Connect at that time and it seemed to me a moment to think, to rethink and to re-emphasise at a point when in the United States, the funding possibilities for long, slow work in different parts of the world was dwindling. Title 6 funding, as some of you know, was coming to an end and the kind of work that it took to learn a language, to spend a lot of time, the old fashioned anthropology, even though anthropology itself as everyone knows here has an absolutely colonial provenance, but that old fashioned work of spending time, spending time to listen, spending time to speak, that old fashioned work of relationality seemed to be on the demise as one found new kinds of brokering and new formats for international delocation if you will, dislocation even.

Then came the 21st century. India's inauguration into the 21st century and I'll start there because the last years of the 20th century in this word of international exchange certainly had at that point the growth of the idea that all of us are familiar with, the Asian city. The Asian city and its modernity was going to provide a type of very peculiar and interesting encounter, an interesting opposition obviously to western modernity, the western city and with a takeover of a kind of western technological and capitalist ethics and asthetics.

For those of us who were in India or those of us who retain ties to South Asia, the Asian city of course was the East Asian city. It was very clearly the East Asian city, a city and it’s an abstraction, a very violent abstraction, that clearly was modelled on some notion of a retaining of Asian values, whatever that might mean, and a technologised public sphere. This strange combination, which in a very messy society, with a very messy modernity like India, was a little bewildering.

It was a different kind of agony and bewilderment than we have heard from before, but it was nevertheless uncertain, but it was also the moment when the Hindu nationalist movement in India was beginning to open the economy. The opening of the economy which had followed a socialist pattern and somewhat of an import substitution model, a relationship to the USSR and then a strange relationship to the United States, a very troubled and problematic location within the non-aligned movement, the opening up of the economy and the new embrace of technology strangely enough came with a very old embrace of Hindu myths, Hindu ideas and a very hoary notion that there was a Hindu past in opposition to a Muslim invasion and this Hindu past with its strange evocation of a consolidated identity was also going to be the tiger, the Asian, the South Asian tiger, if you will, that would lead India into a new modernity.

So it was while we might have watched the Asian tiger of East Asia with some bewilderment in the early 1980s, we were beginning to see the same formulation take place on a grand scale in India and then in some very day-to-day ordinary ways. Down the street from a place I often visit when I'm in Madras, which is now renamed Chennai, a sign of another kind of ism, was a small shop, very popular in the 1980s, which was a little signpost behind a provision store that stated "McDonald's".

McDonald's wasn't the twin arches that you imagine it to be. McDonald's when you went back there had a big sign that said, "Take off your shoes before you enter" and when you took off your shoes before you entered McDonald's and went inside it had a series of glowing dark screens. McDonald's was a little internet cafe and it was the first introduction of new technologies in India, but with very old forms of sociality. You took off your shoes, you went in and if you touched the keyboard on the computer screen to which you were assigned after you paid up, up came the screen and it was usually an image of a God. The popular southern Gods. It would take you a click or two before the God would surrender to Google or Yahoo.

I was always interested in this strange surrender and the possibility of the reassertion, both the introduction of a God and the possibility that this strange, hopefully wild background might reassert itself in the space in a wholly different way. I would sit together with a lot of slim hipped young men who were either chatting, probably not at that time in an E chat,

but were chatting with each other while they looked on line, no doubt to apply to universities in the United States.

In recent years as I have visited, McDonald's has disappeared. I don't think that McDonald's has been substituted by the twin arches, I don't know where those slim hipped young men have gone, but I think the slim hipped young men have acquired mobiles and broadband connections at home and the Gods have entered a very new realm. The Gods have entered in the form of large hoardings which now advertise grew upon grew, that the Indian middle class has reappropriated as a way of finding meaning in this very technological world. This mixture of a kind of peculiar evocation of a past, a modernity, inserted into this technologised modernity, is a very troubling contemporary space to insert oneself into.

It is troubling because it is very possible to see within it a very comfortable co-existence of Asian tradition and modern values. I don't think that's what's happening.

I'm going to move on a little quickly because I want to say that while we were celebrating all of this breakdown in internationalisation, the 21st century hit and I was in New York when that hit and obviously the anxieties of the millennium passed but 2001 hit with a very big bang in New York City.

As some walls came tumbling down, we found that some very literal walls were re-erected and they were re-erected not only in the United States, but they had an impact across the rest of the world. That flip flop, which has always struck me as incredibly curious, that the moment of celebration and the moment where you imagine that Coca-Cola and Hollywood had surely taken over the senses of the world adequately, it was important to reassert some very old systems of separation as well as to go halfway across the world and enact some very old and very violent systems of appropriation.

Undoubtedly, with the first events post-2001, with the desperate horror in Kabul and then in Baghdad, two cities that to me growing up in Bombay formed a very crucial part of my imagination, these were the cities that one imagined and one was told in the history books of my time, were cities to which we were connected. Kabul and Baghdad.

I started to think then about the politics of relation and one of the first projects that I took on when I came to the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, which was two years ago, because it was proximate to the World Trade Centre, we decided to think then about the relationship of art and culture to the recovery of cities and we did a two-year project called Cities, Art and Recovery. Cities, Art and Recovery has meant inviting people from around the world to come to New York and to think about the ways in which they have used art, culture, to respond to the notion of disaster or catastrophe in their own context.

In trying to select, in trying to invite and looking around the world to think who we might invite and whom we might ask to bring, it suddenly became apparent that you could invite anyone from anywhere in the world. Everywhere in the world has suffered some form of catastrophe or disaster. In the immediate past, there had been tsunamis, floods, apartheid, terrorism, in the last year, before every summer before the September summit, I found either bombings in London, bombings in Madrid, a war in Beirut, I found literal walls growing up in Israel, I found it difficult to bring people to come over.

I began to think that in this chatter about the internet and connectivity and blogs and in this enormous production of our sense of relationality, how is it that we are unable to feel no real emotion that enables us to act about the one universal connection and that is about the fragility of the body across the world. The fact that the bodies are fragile, the fact that bodies fray, they are killed, they experience horror, terror, how is it that this is not a point of connection?

One of the ideas that I want to throw out in terms of trying to think about co-operation across boundaries, time to think about fora that are international in scope, to think about the fact that perhaps the most international of ideas now is the internationalisation of horror, terror and disaster. How can we craft responses? How can we craft relationship between the self and the other that pays attention to the vulnerable, to the tender, to the fragile?

So in closing and it will just be a minute, I want something about a very old tradition in India, a very westernised tradition. The first thing I thought of when we talk about East meets West that is of course Kipling

of whom I assume most of you are familiar. East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet. Most of us don't think much more than that first statement and of course then you have the answer, East will never meet West. But we forget that actually the little introduction to Kipling's very long poem has another couple of lines and it says:

"But there is neither East nor West border nor breed nor birth when two strong men stand face to face though they come from the ends of the earth."

I want to offer Kipling not as a solution, but as a caution. It's very troubling to me to think that we might consider ourselves in relationship to the other, however you might construct that other, in a triumphal way. That you believe that strength and the confrontation face to face, notions of honour, notions of muscle flexing, robust encounter, a triumphal encounter of East and West, a triumphal encounter of East and East is what will call this binary to disappear or any binary to disappear. Rather I want to suggest that we must pay attention to a relationality that's based on vulnerability, on fragility, on understanding that spot that's tender, that spot that will give, that must be handled with tenderness. Thank you very much.