Making Art, Making Change

The Tactical Use of Guerrilla Intervention

By SCOTT TSUCHITANI

In the summer of 2004, they seemed to be everywhere. Every time I stepped outside, I would see advertisements for *Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile*, a blockbuster exhibition at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

It drove me crazy: what was a public museum doing, aggressively promoting a hyper-sexualized Orientalist fantasy in the name of ticket sales, to the detriment of the Asian American residents upon whose bodies this reinvigorated fantasy would be projected?

The cultural politics were so problematic I saw no choice but to act. I created a parody of the museum's promotional poster, and posted it all over Japantown, and then proceeded to plant dozens of flyers in the racks of the information counter inside the museum itself. I documented all of this, along with a variety of thoughtful viewer responses, and fed it to the media. The *San Francisco Chronicle* ran nearly a full page, in the process forcing museum leadership to respond.

This was my first experience with guerrilla art intervention, and as it turns out, only the beginning, as I began to discover for myself the meaning of an art practice which is less about making things than it is about making things happen.

What can art do? And what makes it work?

I make art in a genre that goes by many names, among them "socially engaged art," "social practice," and "tactical aesthetics." What it boils down to is a multidisciplinary form of art that combines visual and performative media with participatory social relations, to explore the question

of "What can art do to create change?"

Within the field of socially engaged art, I make a specific form which I call guerrilla intervention, which consists of unsanctioned public art activities which are visually documented and then disseminated through social and mass media to generate informed debate, reframe the dominant discourse, and shift the culture.

I'm going to share a series of three interventions I've performed critiquing the Asian Art Museum's cultural practices, to shed light on the process, impact, and principles behind this kind of work.

I. The P.I.R.A.T.E. Aesthetics of the Geisha Guerrilla

As expressed in the P.I.R.A.T.E acronym, the art is intended to generate a multiplicity of responses, by operating on multiple levels to reach multiple audiences: Provoke, Inspire, Resist, Activate, Transgress, and Engage, with an emphasis on the active engagement of the audience.

But the real piracy takes place on the level of content. In the same way that colonialism and imperialism are based on histories of taking without consent, the piracy or re-appropriation of the visual culture of commerce offers a political praxis with which the marginalized can regain cultural agency.

The fancy term for this technique of creative borrowing is *détournement*, which refers to the appropriation and alteration of a familiar media artifact in order to give it a new, subversive meaning, frequently as a form of critique.

Literally translated, the word geisha simply means "person of the arts," which in my case, as a Japanese American artist, includes me. So in détourning of the museum's poster, I replaced the visage of the submissive faux geisha with my own, returning the Orientalist gaze, no longer as passive object but instead as active insurgent artist. I also rewrote the ad copy to tell it like it is: "Orientalist Dream Come True — GEISHA — Perpetuating the Fetish."

Get People Talking

A successful work doesn't merely make a statement. It begins a conversation.

My posters and flyers contained a tiny prompt and email address: "Return the gaze: geisha_crossing@hotmail.com." This opened the door to dialogue.

I received a range of responses, first from the so-called "first Western geisha" who consulted on the exhibition, followed by community members in Japantown warning me that the museum director's staff was calling around wanting to know "who did this," and a university art historian whose class had been debating the exhibit and offered congratulations on the impact the intervention had inside the museum. A number of initial responses were seeds that grew into further dialogue and understanding.

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Knowing Your Audiences: Leverage the Spectacle

It's important to keep in mind that the art action and immediate audience reaction are only the beginnings of a generative process with the potential to grow far beyond, via a secondary audience who comes into contact with the work through internet or broadcast media.

The interventionist thus provides the media with what they need to make a story out if it, doing much of the media's job for them. This means not only capturing the art action in stills or video, but also managing your own spin, for example, by cultivating relationships with additional voices who can give context and added legitimacy to your project, and then providing these contacts to the media.

When it came to media outreach for the Geisha intervention, I targeted a Japanese American journalist at

the *Chronicle* who could do the story justice, and provided her with contact information for a Japantown community leader, a critic of Asian American contemporary art, and a sympathetic museum employee, in addition to the university art historian and "Western geisha," to provide perspectives to put the art in context of a bigger picture.

II. Tibet: Treasures STOLEN From the Roof of the World

One of the fruitful dialogues generated by the Geisha intervention was with a manager at the Asian Art Museum, who informed me that the following summer's blockbuster show of Tibetan treasures was coming under problematic conditions: museum management agreed to demands from the Chinese government to censor the history of violence and exile that put these treasures in China's hands.

Collaborating with Community

Troubled by what sounded like censorship-for-profit at a city museum, I reached out to local Tibetan liberation activists, to whom I suggested the possibility of a greater impact on public discourse and consciousness through art. This led to collaboration with activist leaders of a regional chapter of Tibetan Youth Congress.

Titled *Tibet: Treasures from the Roof of the World*, the traveling exhibition was met with protests at each stop on its multi-city soft power tour, so museum management was well aware of the potential for controversy when it arrived in San Francisco. There was virtually no advance advertising of this show, leaving us little to work with.

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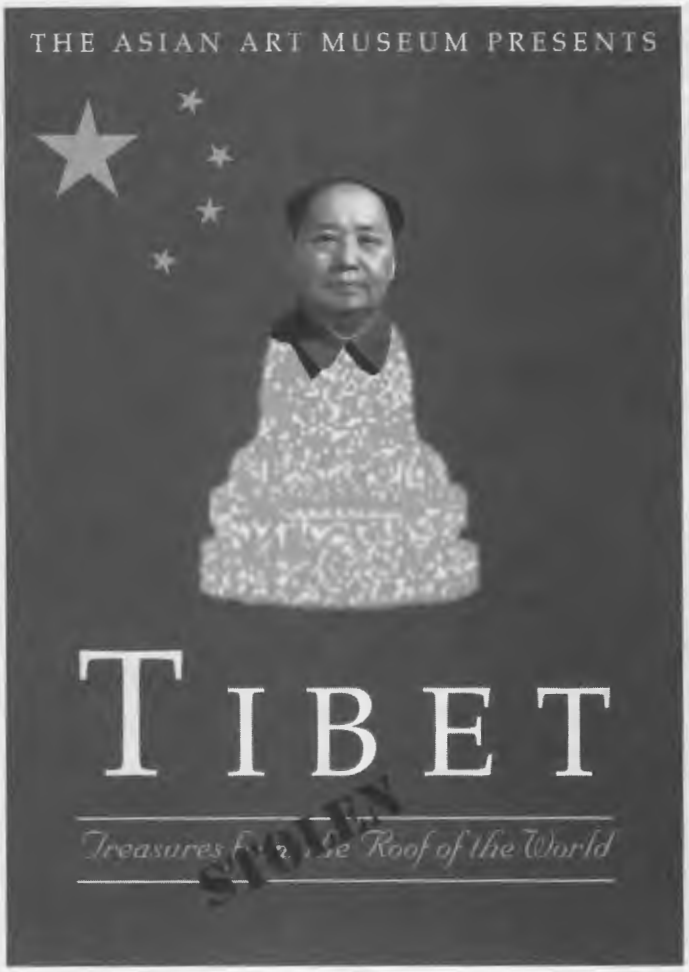
We appropriated the only available museum graphic: an invitation for a $20,000/table VIP gala. The minimal design depicted a small golden silhouette of a seated Buddha against a solid red background. In our detourned version, the red background became the national flag of the People's Republic of China, and Mao's head replaced that of the Buddha's.

I was ambivalent about the image, feeling some concern with offending Tibetans themselves, but the activist leadership embraced it specifically for its provocative value on both sides.



Is it Art Yet?

The image was initially printed on postcards deployed on the red carpet at a protest outside the black-tie gala. The back of the postcard contained propaganda from the activists, which provided contextual information, but also changed the tone and function of the piece. Distribution as such, in the context of the protest, seemed to reduce the piece to a conventional propaganda flyer, thus limiting its function as art.

In order to restore its "functional role" as art, I created an anonymous persona, "The Lone Llama," along with an email account (the_lone_llama@hotmail.com), and emailed the image along with a brief statement of cultural critique to art critics, art historians, and members of the media.

By removing the artwork from the familiar rhetoric of protest demonstration and emphasizing the visual, the Lone Llama appealed to curiosity, and succeeded at creating opportunities for informed dialogue on listener-sponsored KPFA/Pacifica Radio. Without divulging his own identity, the Llama directed radio producers to spokespeople for both the activists and the museum, who were then able to inform the public of the larger issues at stake in what His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself has referred to as "cultural genocide."

III. Lord It's the Samurai: Myth, Militarism, Man-boy Love

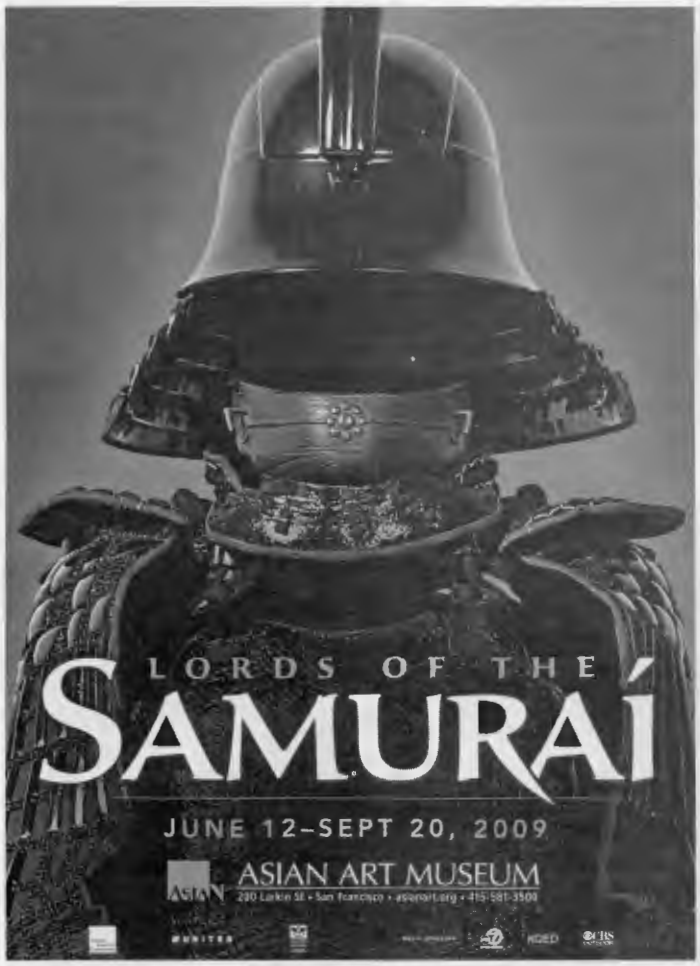
Five years after *Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile*—the Asian Art Museum's biggest selling show of all time—the museum followed up with her male counterpart, with the *Lords of the Samurai* exhibition in 2009.

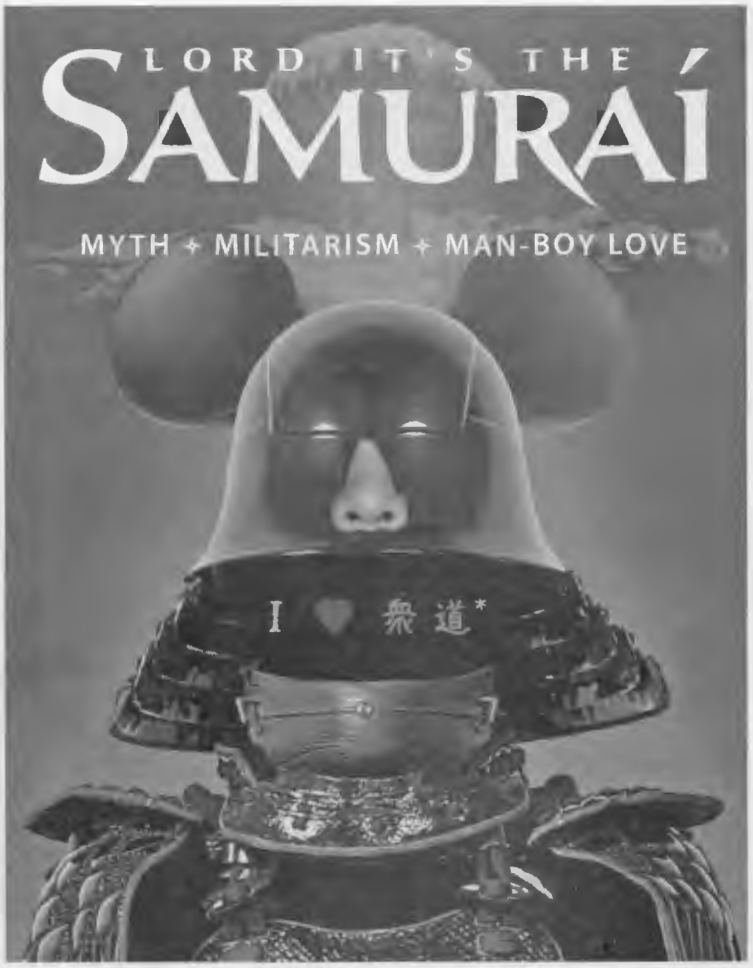
While Geisha was a relatively easy target to critique from feminist and post-colonialist perspectives, the samurai presented a much greater challenge, given the investment by both Orientalist and cultural nationalist audiences in the romantic fantasy of this warrior archetype.

Was this show merely repeating the exploitation of a favorite Japanese stereotype in the name of ticket sales, or was there more to it? How does one approach this effectively through art?

Better Than Armed Revolution

"When artists succeed, they have greater effect than violent revolutions. People take to arms because they believe there is no other way to alter the social nature. There is another way. From an artistic standpoint, it is to create absurdist situations that show people how they have been socialized to see things in certain ways. I show them how ridiculous that is." — *Daniel Joseph Martinez*





The idea is not only to disrupt publicly the dominant stream of cultural production, but also to create a rupture in the psyche of the individual viewer. To borrow from art historian Anne Wagner, the artist creates "a discrepancy between what the viewer sees and feels, and what she can be sure she knows."[1]

In this way, art offers the potential to shake things loose at a level of deeply held beliefs, a means by which to bypass the typical ego-defenses that would deflect more prosaic forms of activist communication. A strategic deployment of art can create change not only among potential allies, but even those most violently opposed to your agenda.

Diversity of Tactics: The Asians Art Museum

For the samurai project, I created a shadow organization called the Asians Art Museum: "Where Asian still means Oriental." In contrast to the actual museum, which bills itself as "*THE* Asian" despite the fact that it was founded and historically run by white people, the "Asians" brand recognizes the plurality of Asian cultures and Asian American communities while at the same time implying a sense of ownership.

"We" branded ourselves with a logo and launched a parody website, nearly identical in both appearance and url address (asiansart.org vs. asianart.org). *Lords of the Samurai* became *Lord It's the Samurai*. Our promotional rack cards looked similar to their Darth Vader-like image, if not funnier and more intriguing. Through collective efforts, 5,000 of them were distributed at Bay Area cafes, bookstores, and yoga studios, and handed out to attendees of special events at the museum itself.

What was wrong with this exhibition about samurai? Here's how our promotional material summed up what I saw as glamorization of military culture eight years into our war in Afghanistan:

"Enter the world of the samurai, where seven centuries of martial rule are reduced to a Disney-like trope of gentleman-warrior myth, masking a real history of violence and domination. Selling militarism as beauty, in a time of war."

I created a public persona as Majime Sugiru, which means "way too serious" in Japanese, Communications Director of the Asians Art Museum, and performed an educational and media outreach campaign in which I conducted interviews with press, blogs, KPFA's Hard Knock Radio, and spoke to a number of local college classes.

Intellectual Activism

Messing with a warrior archetype can be tricky business, so in anticipation of blowback I employed what the Independent Scholar's Handbook terms "intellectual activism": *activities which make existing knowledge more accessible, understandable, and useful to others.*

So in this case, I not only appropriated the commercial imagery of the museum, but also the best scholarship and analysis I could find. I incorporated this knowledge with wit, humor, and depth, into a content-rich *Lord It's the Samurai* webpage, hyperlinked to dozens of highly credible references.

As one viewer commented, "I just looked at their site and then looked at yours... what a glaring contrast between fantasy and reality. It totally usurps their presentation and makes them seem downright stupid..."

This approach succeeded not only at making visible the museum's selling of a romantic warrior fantasy in a time of war, but also in recruiting the legitimacy of reputable scholars into the critical dialogue that was about to ensue.

"Join the dialogue" was the tagline of our samurai blog, which hosted spirited international debate from a range of perspectives, from museum educators to martial arts instructors, graduate students, and college professors, in both English and Japanese.

The project went viral, sparking discussion on at least four continents, and eventually producing the equivalent of over 100 pages of public discourse in a variety of online and print publications.

Let's Make a Deal

How does this kind of art work? I like to think of it as using artistic generosity to invite a trade with the viewer, with an emphasis on showing rather than telling. Offer aesthetic pleasure — rich in any combination of formal beauty, humor, poignancy, narrative intrigue, and incisive critique — in exchange for the active engagement of the audience member, ideally in a way that generates participation in your project, consciously or not.

If the art successfully reaches the level of truly irresistible, then even your otherwise would-be enemies will be drawn in, and by the time they realize what they are actually looking at, it's too late: you've already taken them where they would never have gone willingly, confronting them with difficult questions they routinely feel entitled to go out of their way to avoid.

The resulting outrage, in turn, has the potential to set off an unpredictable chain reaction of events as the art takes on a life of its own, making visible the structures of dominance that would otherwise remain unseen.

Censorship at The de Young Museum

Two months after the Samurai exhibit had ended, I entered the samurai project in a juried community art exhibition at the de Young Museum, another city-owned museum in San Francisco. My proposal was approved by the jury, and over the next six weeks I developed an installation based on the intervention. My goal was to have a city museum officially sanction my guerrilla art critique of another city museum.

That's exactly what did not happen.

About an hour before the official opening of the exhibition, de Young administrators—on the phone with their counterparts at the Asian Art Museum—ordered the removal of the bulk of my installation, computer printouts of the 100+ pages of public discourse generated by the project, claiming a variety of reasons, each of which to me seemed spurious. Feeling violated and left with no other recourse than to blog about it, I failed at the time to recognize their act of censorship as a measure of success and blessing in disguise.

Last year it was also covered in an interdisciplinary academic journal that poses the question, "Should museums welcome parody?"

Karmic returns

Last summer, *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum* was published, with a chapter titled "Museum Censorship" that spends several pages detailing the *Asians Art Museum/ Lord It's the Samurai* project, putting the debacle at the de Young in the productive discursive context of ethical museum practice.

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How do you spell "Success"?

While there are many ways to define success, it is ultimately up to the individual artist. Interventional success can be measured by a yardstick of activist goals, but in working through the challenge to balance art and message, it's important to keep in mind that the work must work first and foremost as art.

"There are many people who are technically good at what they do. But can they make art? Can they make works that actually affect people, that change their lives, that burn a hole into the soul, that cannot be escaped in daydreams or nightmares, that become a part of you?"
— Daniel Joseph Martinez, 2005

Scott Tsuchitani is a SanFrancisco-based guerilla artist. His work is focused on cultural interventions and social engagement.