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Responding to Change and Looking to the Future in *Temporal Turn*

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Abstract:

This review covers the five themes of the *Temporal Turn: Art and Speculation in Contemporary Asia*, and suggests the greatest achievement of the exhibition, while also offering suggestions to improve its impact. The paper also delves into the rapid changes in Asia over the past 50 years, including political, cultural, and population transformation, tying them to specific works in the exhibition. The article selects artworks in *Temporal Turn* emphasizing these large, rapid changes made by contemporary Asian artists.

Research into the economic, political, and cultural facets of East Asian culture is used to back claims made in the paper. Furthermore, the paper proposes how the viewer should respond to the exhibition with thematic context, suggesting it disorients its audience in time and reality.

Literature Review:

Connecting the themes of change and speculation to historical and contemporary Asian history separates my exhibition review from the rest. Researching Asia as it develops and grows offers insight into the five themes of *Temporal Turn*. Furthermore, this paper recognizes and explains the broader message of the exhibition, while also unpacking the five themes by giving the reader a comprehensive walk through the galleries, highlighting key works from each theme. Another distinct part of my argument is my recommendation to rearrange the layout of the works to better explore speculation across themes, and to draw comparisons between the pieces. Finally, in describing the exhibition to the reader,

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the paper explains the show's impact on the viewer to consider and contemplate their own society, environment, biology, and imagination rather than viewing *Temporal Turn* with only contemporary Eastern Asia in mind.

Essay:

The untiring march of the clock, our world, our lives, as well as the push for modernity, separates the present from the past and future. Walking into the Spencer Museum of Art and *Temporal Turn: Art and Speculation in Contemporary Asia* places the viewer right in the middle of these three states. The result of six years of field work and research by Spencer curator Kris Ercums, *Temporal Turn* congregates work by twenty-six artists, four of whom, Rohini Devasher, Konoike Tomoko, Park Jaeyoung, and Sahej Rahal, served as artists-in-residence, creating site specific works for the exhibition.¹ The exhibition, divided up into the themes of *Pulse*, highlighting biological art; *The Edge of Infinity*, investigating the interactions between space, time, and mathematics; *Mythopoeia*, examining the meeting point of art and ingrained cultural myths; *Human/Posthuman/Inhuman*, predicting the future of the human race, as well as life forms after or non-human; and *Anthropocene*, depicting the human impact on the natural world, collectively presents a close examination of our current times, past events, and future happenings. Although overwhelming in its wide range and number of sub-themes, *Temporal Turn* is categorized this way to highlight how the artists approach the exhibition's overarching themes of time and speculation. One of the exhibition's main themes, time, should be considered with what Ercums cites as deep time, or time past

¹ Note to Reader: This essay follows the East Asian convention of writing the surname before given name for Japanese, Chinese, and Korean names.

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human understanding. *Temporal Turn*, by upsetting the linear, forward velocity of time, also entertains a speculative view of the universe. Through five themes, *Temporal Turn* shares the artistic response to rapid change, while also offering an opportunity to reflect on time and contemplate the future.

Layering themes of time and change from the initial sculpture at the front of the museum to the final artwork, *Temporal Turn* works to separate the viewer from time and reality, providing its audience the chance to analyze the world on various levels. Approaching the museum's eastern entrance, the viewer's first separation from time, and invitation to speculate the present condition, originates in Sahej Rahal's *Children of Days*. The artist described the work, made from found objects around the city of Lawrence and covered in colored cement, as "ruins from the future."² The work's strategic location as the initial piece in the exhibition catalyzes the theme of speculation. Onlookers are left wondering what the future society looked like in comparison to now, and what led to its failure. Furthermore, Rahal's artifacts suggest disorientation through time and space, reality and fiction, a response felt throughout the exhibition's remaining works.

Continuing into the museum, the viewer sees the next work by an artist in residence, Konoike Tomoko's *Inter-Traveller*, seated on top of a wall in the foyer. The sculpture, a depiction of a young girl from the waist down, reappears elsewhere on the University of Kansas campus and in *Temporal Turn*, specifically in the Natural History Museum, Konoike's Japanese panel *Earthshine*, and in a tree in Marvin Grove. The repetition of the figure creates a sense of ubiquity and simultaneity through space and time. The

² Sahej Rahal (artist) in group discussion, November 2016.

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inter-traveller interacts with the future society depicted in Rahal's work, and lives in the time of the dioramas set in the Natural History Museum all at once. The repetition of the human form displays the theme of *The Edge of Infinity* in the girl's ability to travel through space and time, defying reality.

Next in the main gallery, the viewer is presented with a large screen dividing the room. This work, also by Konoike, continues the narrative of *Inter-Traveller*. The artist's traditional Japanese screen, *Earthshine*, displays on one side the metamorphic change from human to wolf, taken from creation stories made by the Ainu of northern Japan, while the other side shows Konoike's abstract vision of *qi*, a life-giving substance associated with Chinese philosophy. The substance works broadly and specifically, ranging, in the words of James Flowers "from the sublime as in the formation of the cosmos to the inane as in a butterfly beating its wings."³ Providing the viewer a cultural myth of creation and life demonstrates Konoike's conscious effort to retain the cultural past in the two rapidly changing countries in her *Mythopoeia* themed work. In Japan and the People's Republic of China alike, modernization and globalization challenge the old traditions and culture. To the left of *Earthshine*, a large star map spanning the entirety of the wall asks the viewer to engage with the otherworldly, while also observing reality. In her work *Parts Unknown: Making the Familiar Strange*, Indian artist Rohini Devasher layers a mathematically accurate astronomical map of Pleiades with seven video projections depicting alien landscapes. Devasher explains the origin of the seven images as ones taken from a trip to the Indian Astronomical Observatory in the Ladakh region of India, deepening the meaning

³ James Flowers, "What is Qi?," *Evidence-based complementary and alternative medicine* 4, no. 3 (2006): 551-552, doi: 10.1093/ecam/nel074.

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of the work. Contrasting a flat map of the constellation with representations of alien worlds, Devasher situates the viewer between a first-person perspective of a small area and broad view of the universe, continuing ubiquity and simultaneity in the exhibition, and consideration of the *Human/Posthuman/Inhuman*. Devasher's installation delves into this theme of the exhibition by prompting the viewer to question their place in the three positions. The enveloping work begs many questions concerning a past, future, or alien civilization, with no clear answers given. Juxtaposing two perspectives, science and speculation, in one installation continues the effects of Rahal's disorienting sculpture, while also engaging with the *Human/Posthuman/Inhuman* theme.



From Left to Right: Rohini Devasher, *Parts Unknown: Making the Familiar Strange*; Hur Unkyung, *Unknown Creatures*; Konoike Tomoko, *Earthshine*. Photograph by Ryan Waggoner.

Juxtapositions continue to the opposite side of the gallery with a piece by the group of Indian artists and curators Raqs Media Collective, entitled *Night & Day, Day & Night*. The

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24-hour illuminated timepiece, although synchronized to an atomic clock, upsets the



scientific notion of time with 24 phrases of time corresponding to the hour marks. Writing in one of India's three main languages, Hindi, the three artists produce a simultaneous observation of time scientifically and subjectively. Furthermore, by employing Hindi words, the group aims to include Indian significance to the work. Much like the rest of Asia, India struggles with overpopulation and rapid urbanization. The collective employs phrases for a wide range of time, such as *Taru* meaning the time for a tree to grow, and *Nimisa*, the time to blink an eye. With these choices, Raqs acknowledges deep time, an idea outlined in Ercums's text accompanying the exhibition, "From Deep Time to the Multiverse: Speculations on Temporal Imagination." Deep time looks at time not only as numbers, but as a "vast temporal expanse beyond our mortal, finite comprehension."⁴ The flux between a

⁴ Kris Ercums, "From Deep Time to the Multiverse: Speculations on Temporal Imagination," in *Temporal Turn: Art & Speculation in Contemporary Asia*, ed. Kris Ercums (Lawrence: Spencer Museum of Art, the University of Kansas, 2016), 14.

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scientific measurement of time and open-ended words forms a challenge between the two modes, as the viewer chooses how they would like to perceive time.

From Left to Right: Raqs Media Collective, *Night & Day, Day & Night*; Pillar Clock (18th Century Japan). Photograph by Ryan Waggoner.

In the next room, Jin Shan's *Retired Pillar* greets visitors with auditory and visual stimuli. Powered by a blast blower, a latex Corinthian column lies on a pedestal inflating and deflating. The kinetic sculpture suggests heavy breathing by the pillar, as it appears to be on its death bed, knocked from its vertical position, unable to bear weight. The Western motif often employed in colonial Shanghai, as Jin suggests, shows the drive for wealth in China, especially in its special economic zones, where capitalism, rather than socialism, rules in fiscal policy. Tax breaks, private property rights, and land use policy all contribute to larger foreign investments in China, Jin Wang concluded in his economic analysis of such zones, "The economic impact of Special Economic Zones: Evidence from Chinese municipalities."⁵ The research suggests growth in gross domestic product of the municipalities due to the fiscal changes, while also highlighting globalization and modernization in the cities. The distressed pillar hints at an overuse of Western architecture in Asian settings, as well as a call for special economic zones to retain their traditional architecture.

⁵ Jin Wang, "The Economic Impact of Special Economic Zones: Evidence from Chinese Municipalities," *Journal of Development Economics* 101 (2013): 133-147, <http://www.jstor.org/www2.lib.ku.edu/stable/2750087?origin=crossref>.



From Left to Right: Timo Nasserri, *Pion*; Lu Yang, *Wrathful King Kong Kore*; Odani Motohiko, *New Born (Bat_B02_Silver)*; Jin Shan, *Retired Pillar*. Photograph by Ryan Waggoner.

The space between traditional and modern cultures is similarly presented in Park Jaeyoung's *Kansas Bokaisen Project* in the side gallery. Created by Park during his residency at the Spencer, the work takes the form of a laboratory incubating a fictional creature with anatomical similarities to Midwest imaginary creatures such as the jackalope, as well as real ones, like the cottontail rabbit. The work, one of many in a long series by Park, explores traditional stories of mythical creatures, with ones rising from scientific advancements, such as the story of Godzilla in Japan. Like the exhibition's other works, Park's instillation unfurls the threads tying the present to the future, reality and the imaginary, allowing space for contemplation. For instance, the artist allows viewer engagement with the objects on the scientist's desk. Reading and looking at the notes, images, and tools places the viewer in the scientist's futuristic perspective. Park challenges us to question the reality of biological manipulation in the present and future as scientific advancements outpace

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ethics. Utilizing the cultural and societal stories and images in Asia, Jin and Park tap into myths to underscore the changes they witnessed living in Asia.



Park Jaeyoung, *Kansas Bokaisen Project*. Photograph by Ryan Waggoner.

Interweaving themes is the single greatest achievement of *Temporal Turn*. The five themes, under the motif of speculation, offer insight into how Asian artists respond to change of various levels. These layers of time, reality, and speculation collectively make a memorable experience of interactions of past, present, and future, along with traditions and culture. Investigation of historical and contemporary Asia must happen to understand the five themes of the exhibition. Many Asian countries saw large societal, cultural, and political changes over the last 100 years. In Japan, for instance, the Emperor became a cultural figure rather than a political one after the Second World War,⁶ and the country struggles with an aging population, leading to the collapse of traditional Japanese family

⁶ Terry Edward MacDougall, "Yoshida Shigeru and the Japanese Transition to Liberal Democracy," *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale De Science Politique* 9, no. 1 (1988): 55-69, <http://www.jstor.org.www2.lib.ku.edu>.

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structures.⁷ As Haruo Sagaza explains in his article “Population aging in the Asia–Oceania region,” modernization and urbanization draw younger people into the cities, while their parents stay in the rural areas.⁸ China and India share many of these same problems. These countries presently struggle to retain their culture, as the youth have more Western inclinations, while the elders tend to retain domestic culture. This juxtaposition is clear in Hur Unkyung’s *Unknown Creatures*. Three elongated, continuous in form, alien creatures stand harmlessly in the central gallery, their shiny lacquer reflecting light. However, cultural context of the polish over their golden color challenges their peaceful appearance. As mentioned in the exhibition catalogue, the shiny skin on the unknown creatures, urushiol, is a common gloss made by the Chinese. This cross between deep-rooted practices of varnishing and the depiction of a futuristic being explains with great accuracy the temporal turn, or the interweaving between the present and past. The Korean artist’s use of a Chinese staining technique further advances these cultural interactions. The interplay of time, speculation, and Asian cultural differences remains crucial to understanding the exhibition, but also Asia’s position as it grapples with development and modernity. Another edifying quality of the exhibition is the impact it can have for a viewer unfamiliar with contemporary Asian art. *Temporal Turn* presents Asian art to a mostly American audience, well versed in Western art, but not many other areas of art history. *Temporal Turn* succeeds in presenting us art imagined by contemporary Asian artists, as

⁷ Sumiko Oshima, “Japan: Feeling the Strains of an Aging Population,” *Science* 273, no. 5271 (1996): 44, <http://search.proquest.com.www2.lib.ku.edu/>.

⁸ Haruo Sagaza, “Population Aging In The Asia–Oceania Region,” *Geriatrics & Gerontology International* 4 (2004): S34-S37, doi: 10.1111/j.1447-0594.2004.00143.x.

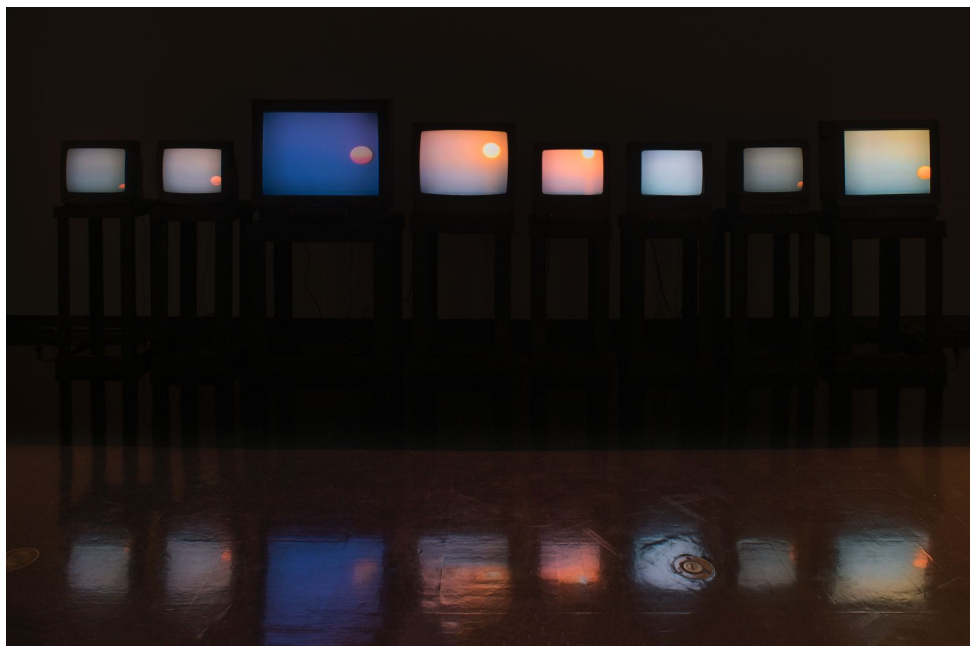
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well as showing the shared interest of responding to change exemplified in many works of the exhibition.

The exhibition *Temporal Turn* covers most gallery space on the main floor of the museum, and the south balcony galleries on the third floor. Despite having continuity in the themes of *The Edge of Infinity*, *Mythopoeia*, and *Human/Posthuman/Inhuman* in the lower level of the museum, the break spatially in the exhibition from the second to third floor diminishes the themes of *Pulse*, and *Anthropocene*. Rearranging the works in the galleries could spark comparisons that would not likely happen otherwise. For instance, Lu Yang's third floor video projection *Uterus Man*, mixing *manga*, or Japanese comic strips, live footage, and computer-generated animation, showing the evolution of the superhero as he grows physically and in power, could have been placed by Devasher's work *Bloodlines*, found on the second floor, to compare the evolution of the organisms. The sexual and gender freedoms in Lu's work parallels Devasher's own liberties with anatomical depictions, but with microorganisms rather than the human. Using a mirror and video monitor, Devasher generates numerous forms resembling microorganisms. A pedigree made by Devasher hangs next to the video channel, connecting the new lifeforms evolutionarily. Installing Lu's and Devasher's works on the same floor, adjacent to each other, could open a discussion of current biological alterations, as compared to contemporary Asian manga and the progression of modifying biological technologies. In addition, the rearrangement would strengthen the overarching theme of speculation, a topic touched on by both artists, even though their works are grouped under different themes.

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Another relocation giving additional continuity would take Neha Choksi's *The Weather Inside Me (Bombay Sunset)* on the third floor and present it alongside Qiu Anxiong's *The New Book of Mountains and Seas 1-3* located on the first floor. The two works, under the theme of *Anthropocene*, address humans' lasting effects on the environment in different ways, but also complement each other. In Choksi's work, nine dissimilar cathode ray tube televisions show the rising and setting sun, with a separate image displaying a picture of the sun on fire. By recreating the sun's path on nine different sizes of televisions, Choksi portrays an augmented, disjointed image of the sun, breaking its ability as a measurement of time, and the cycles it forms, as the sun is paradoxically burned away. The work suggests a change or loss of recognizable cycles in the environment, while also hinting at the rise in temperature due to human influence.



Neha Choksi, *The Weather Inside Me (Bombay Sunset)*. Photograph by Ryan Waggoner.

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The human impact on the environment is more explicitly shown in Qiu's video installation *The New Book of Mountains and Seas 1-3*. Photographing numerous paintings on a single canvas and later blending the individual images together, the artist constructs a narrative of environmental exploitation as a civilization starts and rapidly expands. In the trilogy, modified animals searching for oil, cows feeding off carcasses of past cows, and rapid sea level rises are all commonplace. Qiu limits his palette to black and white, keeping to the traditions of Chinese ink-and-brush technique. Despite his adherence to the traditional painting practice, the artist injects his own ideas of foreign lands in the multimedia work, creating an updated version of the second century text the *Classics of Mountains and Sea*, which similarly imagines distant lands and people. Placing Choksi's and Qiu's works in close vicinity would invite comparisons in how time is portrayed, and each artist's picture for the future. The switch would also concentrate two *Anthropocene* works in the gallery, a theme represented less than the other four. In short, the exhibition could have been arranged in a different way to catalyze more meaningful interactions between the works.

Observing the current condition often leads to a consideration of the past, and a guess for what the future holds. In *Temporal Turn* this is no different, as Asian artists challenge the viewer to reflect on time and look to the future. Through years of research and fieldwork, Ercums shares the sense of rapid change in culture of East Asia to the predominantly American, Western art viewer. Categorized into five themes, *Temporal Turn* is best described for its ability to disorient us from our normal lives and perceptions, and open a new reality of our choosing. The collective impact of the exhibition, highlighting

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many facets of change in Asia, encourages its viewers to think of their personal place in modern society, existing between past and future times, and a new perspective of the world in-between reality and fabrication.

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