

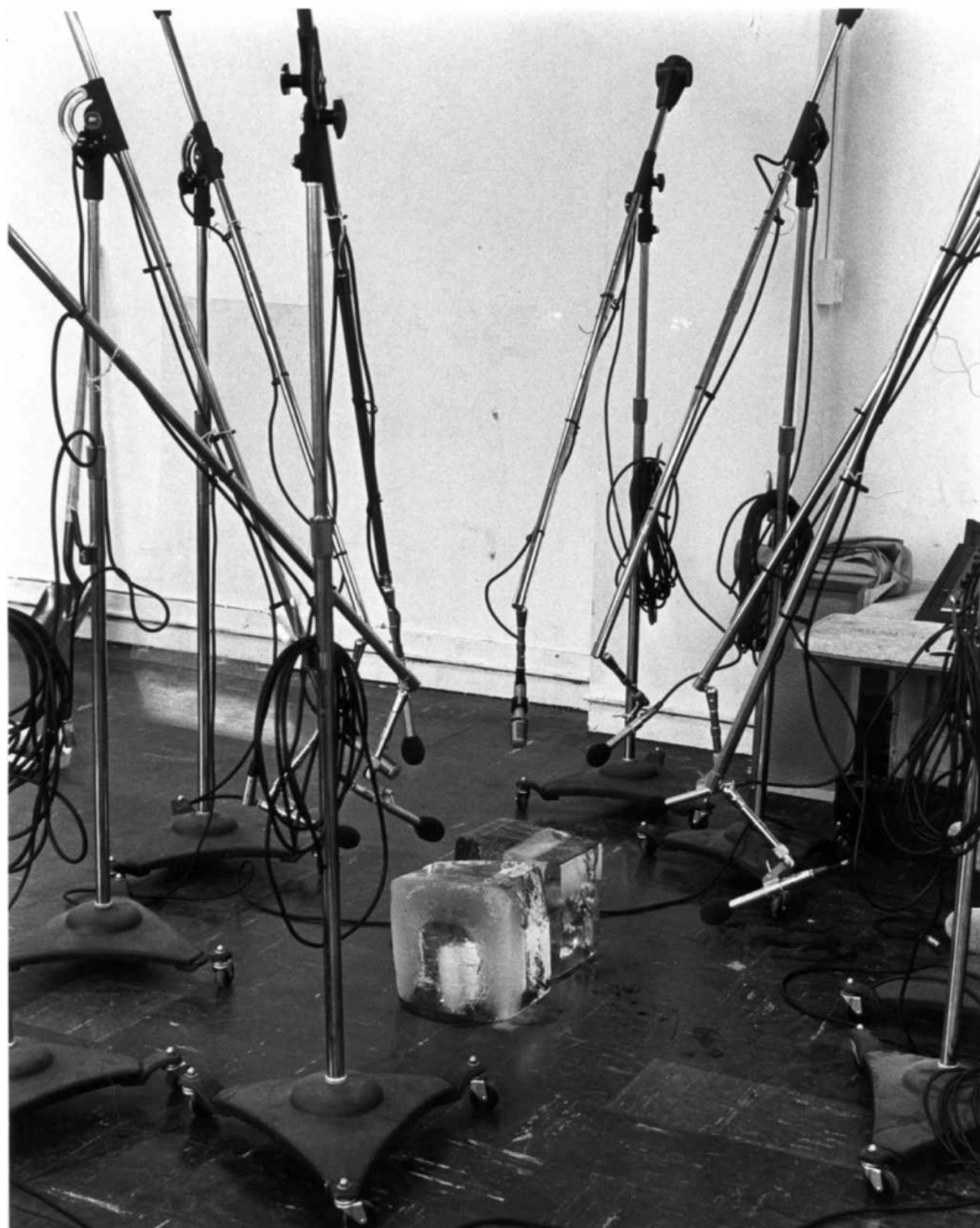
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whitehot | March 2009, The Third Mind American Artists Contemplate Asia

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Paul Kos, Sound of Ice Melting, 1970, Two twenty five pound blocks of ice, eight boom microphone stands, eight microphones, mixer, amplifier, two large speakers, and cables. courtesy Paul Kos



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The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia
[Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum](#)
 Through April 19, 2009

Have you ever heard the sound of ice melting, in a gallery? When the ice in question is two twenty-five-pound blocks and it's picked up by eight microphones and amplified through a pair of tube speakers it sounds almost exactly like static. You have to concentrate to hear it, as it is an installation—aptly titled *Sound of Ice Melting*—erected in the entrance of the Guggenheim rotunda, where its subtle yet persistent buzz carries on underneath the rising and falling cacophony of visitor commotion. It is perhaps a perfect jumping off point for The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, as it is a work that quickly makes visitors conscious of the periphery of their experience, in a way is what the art in this exhibition is about. Going out to the edge of existence, letting go of control, seeking emptiness, a spiritual wholeness, a process of creation that can cleanse one's consciousness: these are the pursuits of the American artists whose work currently fills Frank Lloyd Wright's clean white coils, and it thanks to the curatorial rigor and thoughtful scholarship of the Guggenheim curators that we can now see this period of art through the lens of Asian influence.

The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia focuses on eastern philosophy's influence of eastern philosophy on the practice of American Artists over the years spanning between 1860 and 1889. Beginning, in other words, three years prior to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, a major milestone for equality and freedom in the United States of America, and ending, curiously, the year of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing—a date that marked the absolute rejection of democratic practices in communist China. Exactly why this particular segment was extracted for analysis is not directly addressed, but (noting yet setting aside political correlations) it does frame a particular vision of American art as an assimilating and inclusive practice, focused primarily on objectives outside the commercial realm.

Typically when I think of the influence of Eastern philosophies I think of practicing meditation and spontaneity, exercises that might enable an essential free flow of creative energy. But the curatorial core of The Third Mind: AACA is no nexus of happenstance, it's a system that breaks down and categorizes every work in the exhibition (over 250 pieces) into a series of seven sections based on chronology and theme. It's a system that makes sense coming from the rational grounds of western scholarship, but a paradoxical system when considering that the essence and in some cases the very purpose of these works was to get outside the old categorical traditions of our cultural institutions. Further, much of eastern philosophy, particularly from a Taoist perspective, is in opposition to western terms of linear organization and categorization, preferring instead to think in terms of cycles and fluidity.

So at the heart of the exhibition there are two conundrums: that of attempting to frame the influence of eastern thought within western parameters, and that of displaying work that was created against rules of categorization in a categorically themed exhibition. If I were a Taoist artist I might take note: the way to get your work into a museum is to make work that is not meant to be in a museum.

But western curators are none to shirk at the difficulties of using a new lens to view familiar art, and so what if it distorts the view? It provides a new perspective, and isn't that wholeness of vision what we're all after? It might as well have been Picasso's creed when he began moving his easel around his model, giving birth to what critics would call cubism. So if the curators push up against an old boundary, if their work expands our perception and takes us, if only for a moment, outside of our standard experience of art, then their work resonates with the nature of the art on display, which (Asian influence aside) seeks to acknowledge and expand the periphery of our experience. And when you think about it there is no place more appropriate for this sort of exhibition than in Frank Lloyd Wright's colossal coil, which itself seems to be a reckoning of linear organization within a cyclical pattern.

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