INTRODUCTION

AN UNINTENTIONAL LODESTONE OF POSTWAR art is a 1961 gouache painting by Chinese artists Wu Biduan and Jin Shangyi titled *Chairman Mao Standing with People of Asia, Africa and Latin America* (fig. 0.1). Picturing the culture of delegation at the scale of history painting, it revolves around an image of Mao Zedong surrounded by representatives of what European, North American, and multinational institutions referred to as the "Third World," a term coined in 1952 by French demographer Alfred Sauvy, who focused on newly independent African and Asian states who wanted "to be something."[1] A work of state-commissioned propaganda, the painting recalls precedents like *Awakening (for Peace and Independence)*, a Soviet oil painting from 1957 featuring the peoples of Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas marching together.[2] Yet *Awakening* pivots around the figures of a Black man and woman with downcast eyes, while *Chairman Mao Standing with People of Asia, Africa and Latin America* shows Mao at the hub of this veritable wheel of racialized and ethnicized bodies in the same year that Yugoslav leader Josip

FIGURE 0.1
Wu Biduan and Jin Shangyi, *Chairman Mao Standing with People of Asia, Africa and Latin America,* 1961. Gouache on canvas, 143 × 156 cm. Collection: National Art Museum of China, Beijing.

Broz Tito introduced the Non-Aligned Movement as a reaction against Cold War polarization.

Young as they were, Jin and Wu conveyed a political savvy well beyond their respective ages of twenty-seven and twenty-five in this portrayal of Mao, an earlier version of which tellingly graced the cover of *Meishu,* the most important art publication in the People's Republic of China (PRC). To emphasize the pigmentation of represented bodies, the artists painted the background and the clothes of those depicted in pale washes. In a yellow so muted that it reads as a caricature of neutrality, the background color resonates with the brim of a man's hat and the headscarf worn by an African woman craning her head toward Mao, whose slightly crinkled eyes and rosy cheeks convey fatherly warmth. A far cry from the senile sexagenarian derided by the CIA, Mao is exceedingly animated, in stark contrast to the waxen faces of his guests.[3] Space between the bottom edge of the work and Mao's feet is conspicuously generous, much

like other instances of stock propaganda, but here the space feels like a tactical compromise between the flatness so characteristic of Wu Biduan's primary medium of woodcuts and the will to volume inherent in Jin Shangyi's approach to oil painting. Against the backdrop of the Sino-Soviet split that peaked in 1960 and whose effects continued to reverberate with the Chinese rejection of Soviet influence in Africa on racial grounds, Mao inhabits the center of a new world of nonwhite bodies.[4] One primary claim, then, holds that rational decision-making cannot occur without meaningful consideration of those who in fact comprise the overwhelming majority of the world's people.[5]

Angled along different trajectories, the feet suggest a different map than that suggested by the position of the bodies and the direction of gazes. *Zori* worn by the Japanese delegate point directly toward Mao—reinforcing the centrality of her position, and an indication of reestablished trade and information exchange between the PRC and its former wartime adversary.[6] Imagining ourselves looking at the painting from a distance, we spy a gentle arc created by the placement of other feet on a subdued blue-green ground that suggests the curvature of the earth, a fitting allusion to Mao's efforts to mobilize the universalizing force of the "world" to even the score against his U.S. and Soviet adversaries.[7] Ground figures here as that which is common but not shared, a place to which all are collectively subject. In this way, the work diverges from other Socialist Realist paintings where the ground is merely what helps the picture separate itself from the world of the viewer. The unusual amount of floor space plausibly functions as either a border to keep ordinary citizens at bay, as was the case in the Non-Aligned Conference in Belgrade the same year, or as a bracket fixing the events in the picture. Historian Naoko Shimazu has discussed the performative role of distance in postwar diplomacy, including the storied Freedom Walk of delegates at the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung in Indonesia that brought world leaders into unusual proximity with city inhabitants.[8] Read against the instrumentalization of distance, Wu and Jin's work becomes another point where citizen meets myth. The separation of bodies defines distance. But space is also defined in the painting by bodies in relation to one another and by the massing of bodies. The concreteness of bodies emphasized by the black contour line is reinforced by the solidity of feet firmly planted on a ground whose color could pass either for landmasses depicted on a map or for seas overrun by algae.

Chairman Mao Standing with People of Asia, Africa and Latin America pictures a symbolic, if all too literal, Third World solidarity rooted in the concept of a "global majority." A term circulated from the 1960s by various authors—from investigative journalist Rustom Karanjia, who pithily described the global majority as "seventy percent of the human population spread over half the world's surface," to political scientist George Shepherd Jr., who referred to the collective "struggle to obtain rights" by "states of the periphery with the poor and minorities of the center powers"—the global majority has been defined by the magnitude of its structuring problems, from

crippling wealth inequity to mass displacement.[9] To open the Asian-African Conference of 1955, commonly referred to as the Bandung conference, Indonesian president Sukarno foregrounded "the unregarded, the peoples for whom decisions were made by others whose interests were paramount, the peoples who lived in poverty and humiliation."[10] While the concept of a global majority branched off into different tracks by the 1970s, with advocates of U.S. Cold War policy fretting over Mao's alignment with the "new global majority, thereby substituting political strength for economic and strategic weakness" and Afrocentrist scholars like the psychoanalyst Frances Cress Welsing describing how "the possibility of unification of the world's non-white global majority is the fundamental fear of the global white minority," Sukarno's emphasis on "the unregarded" continued to emphasize an Afro Asia that existed beyond racial, geographic, and class designations.[11] Coined in the wake of postwar decolonization and invoked to mobilize nation-states wary of Cold War polarization, Afro Asia is one of the most effective and lasting conduits for recognizing the global majority, a term commonly used as shorthand for all nonwhite peoples but that also includes the 90 percent of the world's population living outside the G7 countries that have dominated the global economy since World War II. Initially proposed as a call for political solidarity in the wake of midcentury decolonization and enacted through large-scale delegations such as the Bandung conference, Afro Asia galvanized new advocates in the United States and Great Britain beginning in the 1990s as discussions of race and gender turned more explicitly to formations of solidarity intended to counteract white/Black binaries.

Thus since the 1950s, Afro Asia has been deployed in response to decolonization and how mutual struggles for political self-determination could ground international unity outside the overdetermining polarity of U.S.-Soviet Cold War relations. These utterances of Afro Asia revolved around strategic essentialism of the sort illustrated by the native dress visible in Wu and Jin's painting, where generalizations were deliberately made in hopes of achieving specific political and social aims. More recent efforts center on strategically joining "the world's two largest continents and populations" by highlighting parallel histories, exchanges, and collaborations undertaken in the name of anti-imperialist revolution or as an alternative to globalization rhetoric serving hegemonic market and military interests.[12] Important scholarship undertaken in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century on what might be called the historical Afro Asia as it unfolded through coalitions, treaties, conferences, and collaborations from the 1950s to the 1970s has made a compelling case for the narrativizing force of Afro Asia, whose appeal partly rests in its rhetorical potential to elide the reactive thrust of decolonization and Cold War studies and also in the intense, even excessive consciousness its advocates have of its investments and assumptions.

Afro Asia is closely enmeshed with attempts to establish solidarity as a governing paradigm for moral action often founded on distinguishing between solidarity givers and solidarity recipients. The success of these attempts has paradoxically fomented a

punitive model of solidarity within which individuals—already considered suspect by the very possibility of their nonalignment with certain groups—are either allies granted temporary reprieve from the gale force of collective rage denied cathartic release or adversaries to be expunged without chance of redemption. In this space of "dark solidarity" limned by ossified concepts of individualism on the one hand and regimented communitarianism on the other, ambivalence becomes a culpable offense. Equally insidious is the co-optation of solidarity rhetoric by entities including governments, corporations, and universities, which makes the idea of a global majority politically necessary. Denuded of its original urgency, such "dark solidarity" becomes yet another tool for centralizing social and political control, tarring solidarity as an eminently corruptible form of mobilization. Increasingly more legible as a norm, solidarity dilutes the certainty of the cause it promotes while making compulsory new proprieties to which its adherents must submit.

Calls for solidarity in relation to art sound suspiciously like commands to reinstate moral edification as a key criterion for judging artistic value. Yet such calls put art and its renegade tendencies in a bind, for even the most ideologically deferential artworks go off-piste. The tightness of the clustered figures in Wu and Jin's painting telegraphs only too well how proclamations of solidarity often come with strategically implemented exclusion and enclosure. Chairman Mao might stand with ceremonial delegates from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but this stance hardly led to reciprocation in kind; think, for instance, of China excluding Taiwan from its gathering of allies or of how numerous South and Southeast Asian countries refused China's efforts to manipulate Afro Asia into acting as a political buffer against the United States and the Soviet Union. It brings to mind the rebuke issued by India's Ministry of External Affairs to China for instigating the Sino-Indian border crisis between 1957 and 1962: "China believes first in isolating its victim from the non Afro-Asian group and then from other Afro-Asian countries to have things its own way. And all this in the name of Afro-Asian solidarity."[13] Additionally, the subtext of exclusion maps onto a rigidly managed idea of difference reinforced along models of nationality and race. All figures are garbed in supposed native dress. The delicacy of touch visible in each drape and fold read as compensation for what Mao would admit in 1961 was a lack of "clear understanding of African history, geography, and the present situation."[14] Clashing attitudes, incompatible personalities, or even simple disagreement are glossed over as ossified representations of difference artificially joined by the centralizing figure of Mao.

Wu and Jin's painting reminds us that the global majority is less compelling as a statement of representational priorities than it is as a formation inferred from what is envisaged as indispensable or undeniable. The Bandung legacy has a tendency to overshadow other conceptions of Afro Asia, which lacks a fixed geography yet still exists for an *us* irreducible to collectivization and systemic organization. The point is not to dismiss solidarity, but to emphasize what solidarity hopes to do, including how to challenge the adverse impacts of large-scale structures whose operation frequently

renders things and people as expendable fixed quantities. If Afro Asia is an ecumenically minded, anti-enclosure provocation to actual and imagined world orders, it depends on us looking beyond solidarity in order to recognize the sovereignty of artworks. Sovereignty primes us to consider the artwork differently than does autonomy; it turns not on the artwork's independence from extra-artistic matters but on whether an artwork can exert authority uncoerced by such matters.[15] Considering the sovereignty of artworks requires accepting the particularities of an artwork as sufficient bounds within which to consider the work as a realm governed by its own negotiations with other entities including individuals, groups, works, and ideas. As viewers, we access these realms but do not control them, let alone have a right to maneuver artworks into serving as auxiliary illustrations of constructs invoked to conceptualize the world as a structured totality. Thinking about Afro Asia with visual art discloses the former not as a self-evident truth but as a proposition to be argued *with* at the level of granular encounters between things and people whose actualization is constantly ongoing.

GEOMETRY, OR WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT AFRO ASIA

Concurrent with other institutional, academic, and exhibitionary efforts to restructure histories of modern and contemporary art, in 2020 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York unveiled the reinstallation of its permanent collection. In the gallery titled "War Within, War Without," John Outterbridge's *Broken Dance, Ethnic Heritage Series* (ca. 1978–82) and Ha Chonghyun's *Conjunction 74-26* (1974) are displayed at sufficiently close distance that the former appears to be taking aim at the latter (fig. 0.2). Rows of circular white splotches on Ha's sizable painting bear witness to Outterbridge's gleeful target practice; a mannerly tête-à-tête this is not. But since when did honest dialogue ever come without its share of knocks and slights? We are tempted to ascribe some of this rough-and-tumble to the theme of war, and indeed both artists are tangentially joined by the formative impact of the Korean War on their life trajectories—Ha as a teenage civilian forced into a refugee existence and Outterbridge as a U.S. Army ammunitions specialist.[16] The artists meet in this corner to discuss by proxy shared interests in how materials interact to form new possibilities for seeing and feeling.

But trauma cannot possibly be the only rationale for why Ha and Outterbridge belong to a less blinkered modernism. Their works move decisively against how war distills social relationships into binaries of friend versus foe. Something far less scripted is at play. Both coax into view the dignity of materials that were abject precisely because they were not base, but hopelessly banal. Discarded cloth scraps, broken metal parts, and burlap cloth emblematize the shadow underbelly of postwar affluence—postcolonial exigency—in which the global majority seemed condemned to dwell. The ableist assumption that works should present themselves for inspection

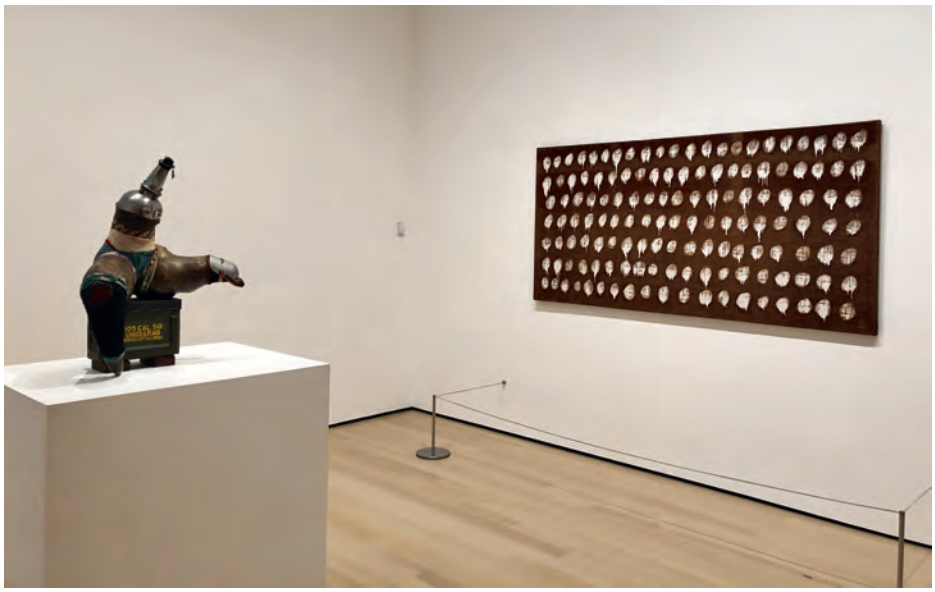

FIGURE 0.2
John Outterbridge, *Broken Dance, Ethnic Heritage Series* (ca. 1978–82), and Ha Chonghyun, *Conjunction 74-26* (1974), installation detail, 2021, Museum of Modern Art. Photo by the author.

by an upright adult viewer is why Outterbridge's work was placed on a standing pedestal. But the leg-like appendages dangling from a center torso render the base into furniture, into a chair on which the humanoid form and its tuber-like extensions sit. The outstretched ligaments teasingly resonate with the traces of gravitational pull dotting Ha's fiber support, but any attempts to lock down the forms as mimetic replications of human body parts slide from the work, much in the way that the grid formation of Ha's circular daubs of paint appears distinctly provisional. Seen across from Ha's combination of liquid paint with an arid burlap surface, Outterbridge's work reemerges as an ecology born of surfaces as well as of volumes. To be sure, the fabric wound around the work's presumptive middle emphasizes girth. But the variegated textures, colors, and patterns call more direct attention to the mottled surface of the leather, the reflective metal, and the gradations of wood.

Broken Dance, Ethnic Heritage Series and *Conjunction 74-26* possess a literalness that serves to counteract the vagueness or overgeneralization characterizing the aesthetic and thematic categories through which they are commonly read. Outterbridge's ammunition box steadfastly refuses to perform as a sculptural pedestal, while Ha's abstraction is the sum of thick white paint forced through a sieve of loosely woven burlap. Yet the bulbous protrusions that mimic both prosthetic limbs and object handles in *Broken Dance, Ethnic Heritage Series* take up space in a way that suggests a much larger entity than its absolute dimensions would suggest. The generous dimensions of *Conjunction*