

On Visuality, Ideology and Facilitating Artists

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The work of many of those great thinkers who have tried to deconstruct the European grand narratives have been recognised as “full of rage,” with a starting point devolved from an anti-Western stance –always acknowledged as over-determined and with a tendency towards bias. Such given characteristics have contributed to a further marginalization of their contribution, even within liberal camps such as members of the intelligentsia who support plurality-ironically their plurality only extends as far as their hostility to unwelcome new revisions of histories. Such scholarly critiques as “Orientalism” were often fleetingly

referred to as the “Said phenomenon” –an embroiled and bitter series of published correspondence which lead to often hotly debated viewpoints on Edward Said’s polemic study of the Orient through textual, and often schizophrenic, references.

Similarly, the publication of the *Black Atlantic* by sociologist Paul Gilroy opened a new dimension in a shared global history by fostering a desire to uncover and unravel previously redundant texts which had provided the basis for an opinionated set of fossilized essentialisms. Perhaps the *Black Atlantic* and to some degree, *Orientalism* now provide the bookends for what we call “postcolonial studies,” and have helped to formulate much of the latter’s theoretical standpoints. Burgeoning in their wake has been a series of interpretations and methodologies, and even academic departments, dedicated to these fields of study and allowing the further questioning of an authority of century old unsettled questions.

Importantly, it has been argued that these dueling treatises have both properly humanized and made central the memory of the “Orient” and the Atlantic –by allowing the reader the ability to rethink ideas and to address the issue of representation within a critical framework. As such, the impact of these publications alongside key works by authors,

poets, film makers and visual artists has helped the process of historicizing both regions and places and making global notions of identity and cultural heritage an internationally important issue.

If one turns to the subject of the biennale, one has to ask the relevant question: “How does our coming to terms with current work provide insight into historical lineage on which we still draw for many of the premises and practices that underpin ongoing activity?”

If we are to entertain this question further, then we have to examine as to how we produce meaning through this formal invention of the arts. In the case of literature, it has often been argued that literary invention transforms lived experience into symbolic form. The art historian Irit Rogoff has often suggested that by closely examining the emerging configurations of post modernity –we are at a place which we call “what is it, that we do”. It is within “What it is, that we do” that we can provide a crucial means by which the apparently seamless, “natural” condition of our existence is called to attention, providing much needed insight, a reflexive self-conscious of powerful critical frames and an uncommodified criticism of moral belief and resistance.

Writing this talk feels in some way like a foray into my recent history, both as an artist and an organiser of events; whether it be exhibition, performance or educational, searching in vain to displace tightly held assumptions of monoculturalism with an encouragement to embrace change and accommodate flexibility. The culmination of my experience in facilitating such dialogue has helped to formulate a theory that comes out of understanding the nature of conflict, even its management, and at other times assisted by resisting assimilation –a theoretical space that has evolved, a technique that has helped this super sensitive substrata to be negotiated. Here of course, in terms of the sensitive substrata, I refer to the racial substrata within the European and North American societies organised and named by racial origin followed by their citizenship –therefore Asian American, Black British or even East African Indian-British –these hyphenated identities has helped to create a manageable belonging within the reality of longing.

As a theory and a technique –a feasible understanding of owns own space, place and a means by which one is able to articulate the drive towards liberation, amalgamate to create agency and network- this is vitally important for the survival in the harsh environment of post-colonial subjectivity and geography.

Much of the radical questioning of norms from a multitude of social groups including Asian groups in the Western hemisphere, has allowed a re-classification and re-entry into aesthetic hierarchies –from post-war bombardment culture to the safety net of collective deferment in the late 20th century. One barely survives these semiotic attacks and decodings, but for the displacement and breaking of canons. This breakdown of structures, which had substantiated so much of what we call cultural heritage, had become entropic agents –their demise by the hard work constructed within Feminist responsibility and other such mediating discourses have helped advance the current values of plurality and inclusion- all this allows me the space to talk to you now.

Here we are, together, under one roof, in the early 21st century as observers, with the strongest formulation of gender-balanced cultural production in the history of art, having undergone a cultural levelling that has helped the

redistribution of value into a functioning and imagined humanism that offers grounds for resistance to oppression and a necessary counsel of tolerance, comprehension, and mercy.

So, how has art, in particular Contemporary Asian Art and networking, allowed for this cultural levelling and help formulate a perforated art world?

The Austrian art historian, Christian Kravagna's, insight into the work of the black American philosopher and visual artist, Adrian Piper, throws light on how these contextual shifts have occurred; she argues that "[...] the concept of aesthetic experience remains a constant factor". Piper insists that art has the potential to set in motion an experiential process of learning and change; and her firmness on this point is all the more noteworthy since a constant theme of her work is a substantive critique of art (the art world) and its denial of political issues in the name of aesthetics. Piper rescues the aesthetic, as a form of insight with a transformative potential, from the clutches of a conservative value system; and this is why her position is such a fruitful one, for any discussion of the relationship between social criticism and aesthetic/artistic praxis"¹. It is within these prolonged studious investigations that post-modernity strives towards a reassessment and re-appropriation of orthodox histories into symbolic allegories as an apt means of responding to imperial representation and dominance.

Within the Asian Contemporary Art scene, which itself should not be homogenised as a single monolithic unit, we, too, have certain tendencies that could be folded together and visualised as an agency based on social criticism investigating and reassessing representation.

Here we are able to trace three areas which are pertinent to the remit of this paper: Namely the issue of Asian Contemporary Art and Networking. The three areas outlined could be:

- a) Giving Advice
- b) The remuneration for such an exchange
- c) Experience and Fate

a) Giving Advice

Within an artworld that has been commodified and which embodies both racial and national values based on the European notion of modernity and narratives, the Asian counterpart, of course, has been part of the unfolding enquiry working towards a plurality in the site of production and meaning. Of course, Asian artists, alongside other disenfranchised communities in the art world, are fighting the chronic laziness of institutions and curators in allowing these guarded histories and spaces to move away from repressed dialogues into a transformed and possibly activist multi-cultural practice. But we do have to be careful here, that this "oppositional" rhetoric of radicalism in fine art and criticism does not become formulaic and academic i.e. institutionalised in the worst sense.

¹ Kravagna, Christian *Political arts, aesthetic politics, and a little story about the Nachträglichkeit of experience* in Bruegel, Roger M & Nowack, Ruth (eds) *Things We Don't Understand*, Breitwieser, Sabine / Generali Foundation, p. 96.

b) The remuneration for such an exchange

Much of the radical questioning of norms has allowed us to cross the marked boundaries of modernity where form was the ultimate goal. Today we face a much more diverse community that has emerged from this rhetoric of opposition and countered histories where the analysis of context, material and moral conviction backed by a substantial reworking of a complicated set of interconnected “others”, has created the contemporary context of sometimes “rather unwelcomed observations”.

The outcome, in contemporary aesthetic values, has been of images that are nuanced and complex, of images engaged with history, especially post-war 20th century history, of images flirting with autonomy and the substantive criticism of biased narratives.

In conclusion, it seems that modernity's ultimate goal, which was form-orientated in the production of art and the aesthetic investigation, has been vehemently dislodged towards a more politically and socially engaged post modernity. We can trace this form especially from within the diasporic communities in North America, from artists such as Mel Chin, Ho Tam, Yong Soon Min...to British ones including Chila Kumari Burman and Rasheed Araeen. On the Asian continents such positions are held by Farhad Moshery and Shadi Ghadirian (Iran), Shilpa Gupta and Jitish Kallat (India) to Wang Gongxin and Li Wei (China). In a sense they describe an emergent artistic/aesthetic praxis of transformative potential for re-assessment and re-appropriation of histories, into what can be described as complicity, suggesting mutual gain. Here the artist is not a complete outsider but, even as another, is based within society and working within its various components including values, system and operations. They thus are helping to create our “shared cultural knowledge base”.

c) Experience and Fate

The last category may be seen as a conclusion to this paper. Recent experiences which are cumulative and shared within a more globalised art field have allowed us all to have a more comprehensive understanding and working relationship within a more levelled field of cultural production.

The plethora and velocity of 21st century culture, its capacity increased to accommodate previously othered explorations of visual practices, is now broader based in comparison to the rather reserved communities and notions of High Modernity which was so European in its outlook and formation. With the experiences of major Asian events including the Biennials of Gwanju, Sydney, Beijing, Singapore, Shanghai, Istanbul, Jakarta and Triennials including Yokohama and India, the frame of and benefit to aesthetic concerns and values have widened to accommodate and change the hegemony of European modernity and postmodernity. These forces of change have helped institutional frameworks to start the process of accommodating and accepting trajectories which had remained outside of their remit. Artists, curators and organisers are mediators of social conscience of culture, instrumental through political and aesthetic endeavours in creating space for different dialogues for the broadened globalised whole. With *Asian Stories*, as exemplified within Biennale structures, as well as major other interventions in the 80's and 90's (*The Other Story*, Hayward Gallery, London, Documenta II, Kassel), we are more aware of the power structures of theory and curating that had preserved art within a historical European arena. Fate demands now that we proceed from this historical re-writing, from once marginal positions, from the monolith of formalism into contingent and interconnected practices. Fate remains now firmly in our own hands, encouraging us to define the ground of forms, legacies, lineages, and models of aesthetics.

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