

Global art after 1989

The conditions for an expanded view of “The International” were already set during the early 1980s. Regionalism was one of the relativising strategies in post-modern theory although in practice it was largely limited to discussion of perceived centre/periphery hierarchies within the Western mainstream or with other cultures that it appropriated into itself.

It was clear that there was a growing appetite for difference of another kind to relieve what some saw as the enervating repetition of the new. This was applicable to theory but even more strongly to the marketplace. For example in Australia Aboriginal art began to take off as a market commodity in the 1980s and to be included by curators in surveys of contemporary art, for example Bernice Murphy’s Australian Perspectives 1981 and 1983 and Nick Waterlow’s Biennale 1979. At about the same time hitherto inaccessible avant-garde art from The Soviet Union was rushed into the hungry markets as Glasnost began to ease communications between USSR and the West.

Rubin’s exhibition *Primitivism* at MOMA in 1984 stimulated heated discussion about appropriation of tribal art by modern artists but it was not till 1989 that Jean-Hubert Martin really attempted to bring objects from significantly different cultural sources together as contemporary art. *Magiciens de la Terre* was a landmark exhibition. The thesis was that you could exhibit tribal and sacred art from other cultures along side western avant-garde practices by embracing them under the umbrella of a spirit of place. For example Jean-Hubert juxtaposed Richard Long’s mud drawings with sand painting from Northern Australia. Critics including Hal Foster thoroughly deconstructed this strategy for obscuring the specificity of both cultural contexts, but these juxtapositions were not based on purely formal association nor can they be described as appropriation. Martin’s belief that great art marks humankind’s relationship to the world from which it arises may not be a sufficiently incisive tool for comparing such objects but neither were the objects completely incommensurate.

The fall out from this exhibition has been extraordinary changing the traditional boundaries of contemporary art. We all know the arguments for and against Jean-Hubert’s strategy. Spiritual attachment to the earth is not a core value of conceptual and post-conceptual art so the selection of western artists was narrow in its scope and sacred non-western art was ripped from its legitimate context. However it was a genuine attempt to be inclusive and to find a meaningful umbrella to allow diversity in a single cultural space. Artefacts that had been subject to anthropological study now needed to be understood in the light of contemporary visual art theory.

This situation raised two very obvious problems. Some artists and curators from the third world saw this as moving from one form of hegemony to another with the effect of producing the key bugs of globalisation; assimilation and then homogenisation. The other problem is for the West; if objects created under different systems of belief could be included within the cannon of contemporary art we might no longer be able to understand art through a system of shared histories and theories. If this was to be the case, what was to become of all our art historical

and theoretical scholarship? Some saw this as undermining their life's work while others revelled in the inevitable relativism that this would bring into our discourse.

In 1990 at the Venice Biennale

There was a major conference organised by Mary Jane Jacobs through Arts International NY. The irony of meeting to discuss the possibility of an expanded concept of International art under the aegis of an agency based in NY was not lost on the participants. None the less it was a defining event. Delegates were allocated to discussion groups comprising 6-7 curators each and for 3 days they discussed specific topics allocated to them. My group included a curator from Benin, another from Cyprus one from Slovenia, a very senior US museum director and another leading US curator and myself as the Antipodean colonial. At the end of each day we reconvened for plenary sessions where each group presented their findings and members of the audience responded.

I recall The Yugoslavian artist Braco Dimitrijevic saying:

The avant-garde is exhausted we are all tired, here is some fresh blood lets drink!
Vampirism was often referred to in anticipation of the market response to come. We were already seeing African exhibitions in the west, mostly based on Andre Magnin's, research/safaris for Jean-Hubert Martin and Jean Pigozzi. There was a vigorous debate but in the end it did little more than articulate the scope of the challenge. Fifteen years down the track I am still not sure if we have lived up to that challenge.

One of the side effects of thinking through these issues has been heightened awareness of differences that exist within the cultures that have previously been thought of as part of a homogenous main stream. Even within the West it is important to recognise local differences in the significance of signs and to acknowledge the weight of cultural traditions that inform our art. Arte Povera for example carries a great deal of baggage from antique Greece and Rome tempered by their interest in natural sciences. Likewise Gutai and Monoha in Japan drew on ancient Japanese traditions. Italy and Japan effectively integrated these local histories into local modernisms and this provides a point of entry. Where neither modernism nor shared cultural histories exist a formalist analysis may be the only obvious common ground and this is clearly not adequate given the dense cultural significance of these art forms.

How can we include such works without depriving them of their living context? It could be helpful to integrate Anthropology more closely into art historical methodology but there is an understandable resistance to this idea from the communities themselves because of a century or more in which they felt themselves to be objectified by Anthropology. In this conference however we have heard an example from Jennifer Biddle of how an anthropologist can sensitively reveal the specificity of cultural traditions expressed in material terms. She vividly invoked the shimmer derived from the movement of women's bodies painted for ceremony as they enact the ancestral creation of the land. The paintings derived from these performative works exactly reproduce the making of the land. The surface of the paintings allowing us to experience skin becoming the crust of the earth. This is close observation of cultural practice but it also reveals a transformative aesthetic.

Curatorial Strategies to accommodate diversity

In spite of the ethical difficulty and lack of theoretical consensus many curators have embraced diversity for a variety of reasons ranging from romancing the exotic to a genuine democratic commitment to inclusiveness. In the absence of a universal critical framework these Curators have sought presentational strategies to facilitate integration. This is not always supported by a sufficiently rigorous framework with the result that difference is merely masked and boundaries blurred without advancing our understanding of individual works or possible cross currents.

[Boundary Rider, The Ninth Biennale of Sydney 1992]

In 1991 I was given the opportunity to curate the Sydney Biennale which was a great opportunity to put some of this theory into practice.

[Mexican Border image]

The world was changing rapidly with the iron curtain coming down and this wall shown on my slide was being built between Mexico and USA. It was made from left over steel landing mats from Desert storm. At that time it seemed a bizarre metaphor for US foreign policy but since then of course exclusion and incarceration have become horribly normal not just for the Bush administration but in our own country. My title *Boundary rider* was intended to evoke the issues of borders that dominated both real politics and cultural theory at the time.

[Mexican Border image]

I was conscious of how important it would be to find practical strategies to deal with issues of difference while avoiding obvious demarcations between the haves and the have nots as well as providing a transparent rationale for inclusion. I decided that whereas spirit of place was found to embrace works that were incommensurable and set up false correlations, politics might be a more coherent guide to selection given the dynamics of the times. I still needed an aesthetic curatorial strategy to make sense of the diversity I was hoping to include.

Put very briefly I employed two strategies; selecting artists who employed bricollage and then juxtaposing works of differing levels of apparent sophistication or “finish” from both developed and developing countries. Dan Cameron noted the latter strategy when he developed his exhibition *Raw and Cooked, Cocido y Crudo* in 1994-5. It was no coincidence that we both drew on Levi Strauss; this is in part an anthropological debate. (*bricollage* and *raw and cooked* are both terms used by Strauss).

I hoped that working with artists who use found materials or other forms of cultural bricollage could introduce a material consistency in the exhibition that would diffuse the ‘othering’ effect of cultural and economic difference. I also believe that everyday objects trigger memories and associations that have the potential to communicate across cultural boundaries in certain instances.

The following slides demonstrate a few examples of how these strategies played out in practice.

[Kamol Phaosavasdi Repercussions of Agriculture 1992]

Phaosavasdi made a work critical of the process of modernisation concentrating on the pollution that is poisoning the once beautiful countryside and urban waterways

of Thailand. Kamol used found objects to make his point including the rubber gloves provided to protect us from the poisoned earth.

[Ashley Bickerton *Stylepiece headtrip* 1992]

Was at the time one of the most fashionable Neo Geo or Commodity artists in New York but there was sufficient synergy between his presentation and Kamol's that the discrepancy between their circumstances was not problematic.

[Mladen Stilinovic *Dead Optimism* 1989-90]

Like many artists emerging from the old soviet block Mladen looks back to the old avant-garde for inspiration rather than to an easy adaptation of everything capitalist or American. His installations take the form of Suprematist exhibitions but make use of found objects.

[Doris Salcedo *Los atrabiliarios* 1990-92]

Doris was in many ways the central figure of the exhibition for me. Her installation of *Los Atrabiliarios* depicts embodied memory as it addresses the dialectics of violence that have ruined her country of Colombia. It is a personal memorial that in a way breaks the silence imposed by the disappearance of villagers all over the country. The shoes of the disappeared are enclosed behind animal caul sewn into niches in the wall as a silent testimony of loss.

[Dolly Nampajimpa Daniels *Untitled (my place)* 1992]

Dolly normally made dot paintings of the landscape but her main concern was working to improve the lot of her people. Through an interpreter I invited her to show us about her life - not in painting that would have been at odds with the prevailing strategies of the exhibition - but rather to find some way of bringing objects from her daily life that would convey her circumstances to the world.

After some Months Dolly called for a truck and loaded her home and transported it in its entirety to the Biennale. For some time she lived within the exhibition, playing cards and talking to the curious. It could not more clearly have shown the world the extraordinary conditions many Aboriginal people experience.

Cocido y Crudo

In 1994 Dan Cameron presented his exhibition *Cocido y Crudo*..... He wrote in the catalogue:

"When it became clear that the interchange between multiple cultural positions was in fact the primary topic of this exhibition it was necessary to indicate as clearly as possible that an alternative was being proposed to the West's dichotomy of raw vs cooked, and that this alternative could be signalled through an attempt at *dehierarchizing* the point of view of the speaker.....

....A certain ambiguity is created for the role of the artist as one who discovers and then re-contextualises found materials, images, sources and situations. Is this a shamanic figure we are speaking of, or a kind of grand chef to the public? Or perhaps it means that the artist is the one who prefers to keep the distinction between the one who acts upon situations and the one who records and interprets those actions, as deliberately blurred as possible. Either way the title (*raw and*

cooked) seems apt for incorporating a breadth of interpretive possibilities within its scope, and not limiting the viewer's imagination to a finite number of meanings.”

I take this to mean he was trying something rather similar to *Boundary Rider* and indeed there was a remarkable overlap in the artists we chose to work with.

[Doris Salcedo *The widowed house 1993-4 and Untitled installation 1999*]

Following the *Atrabiliarios* series Salcedo began her many sculptures based on furniture here you see doors going nowhere and beds lost in the walls. The *Untitled* series shown in *Trace* Liverpool Biennale 1999 show how the furnishings act both as a treasured memorial to the missing and a terrible reminder of the silence their disappearance brings on the community.

[Mark Dion *Collectors/collected 1994*]

Dion's work exemplifies a complex take on Surrealist history which could be seen as a comment on the pre-history of globalisation. The post minimalist presentation conceptually disrupts traditional museum display formulae and anthropological taxonomies. And yet there is something direct about the poetry of things and the personal narratives that the juxtapositions permit the viewer, regardless of, yet contingent on, their cultural context.

[Svetlana Kopystiansky *Untitled 1994 and Trainer 1992*]

These works one from *Cocido y Crudo* the other from *Boundary Rider* and now AGNSW collection came at a time when the Kopystianskis were first living outside the Soviet Union and working very much with the memories of the repressive structures they had endured there.

These tendencies in *Boundary rider* and *Cocido y Crudo* are not post 1989 in fact they are clearly derived from Western conceptual art practices used since the 1960s to weaken the boundaries between the authorial voice and that of the interpreter or curator and between white cube and the street. It seems the Avant-Garde contained all the techniques for its dissolution or put more positively for a new way of adapting to difference and this continues to be the prevailing tendency in contemporary International exhibitions.

Subsequent strategies

Several independent curators since then have elected to work with this situation to further loosen the definitions, blurring art and life both in the works selected but also in the design of exhibitions and the manipulation of site as content. Curators have directly collaborated with artists or created scenarios in which the role of the artist becomes ambiguous within a broader scheme devised by the curator and or architect.

Cities on the Move 1999

Was an exhibition curated by Ho Hanrou and Hans Ulrich Obrist with additional guest curators and artists that changed as the show travelled. It involved curatorial collaboration between curators, artists and architects to disrupt normal viewing patterns and monolithic interpretations. It had no fixed shape but changed as it toured. I saw it in London at the Hayward Gallery where they had gone out of their way to destroy the logic of the building, such as it is, and to bring the street into the

space so that at times it was not immediately clear if we were seeing street stalls and Hong Kong movies in their own right or if they were part of some installation by an artist. The deliberate confusion was further compounded, temporally and aesthetically, by the recycling of the props and furniture from the previous *Fashion in Art* exhibition as well as by a great deal of visual and acoustic noise. Hanrou took this strategy even further in his hang of the Arsenale in the 2003 Venice Biennale.

APT

Many of the projects designed to be inclusive such as the APT in Brisbane have favoured installation art, the use of found objects and new technologies. The exhibition strategy in Brisbane has been quite the reverse of *Cities on the Move* however. In order to make sense of plurality and variety of *cookedness* they have adopted very strong exhibition design and presentational strategies that suppress difference. This has been critiqued as undue interference by some critics including Apinan Poshyananda and Marian Pastor Roces. Many of the works that might have benefited from being left raw were overcooked in their re-presentation.

Documenta 11

New technologies have also appeared as a solution to the problem of difference, particularly the prevalence of documentary film which does not presume prior knowledge of the avant-garde. In Documenta 11 many artists from Africa, India and the Middle East; opted for these media. Some critics of Okuwi's Documenta seem to suggest that documentary form and aesthetics are mutually exclusive but on the contrary films by artists such as Zharina Bimji and Trin-ti-min-ha were as beautiful (taking a conventional interpretation of aesthetic) as anything I have experienced in any art form for some time. Not only did they tell their stories beautifully they navigated the spaces from very particular artistic perspectives that gave the viewer particularly powerful access to their subjects.

Trin-ti-min-ha for example made us very aware of the hand that carried the camera through spaces where we would not normally have been given access. Her relationship with the women of the village must have been carefully negotiated so that following her eye (that of a displaced Vietnamese woman) into this private world we felt especially privileged to empathise with the occupants. It is my belief that even the most formal modernist account of this work would need to acknowledge the primacy of the medium in producing both the affective quality of the work but sensitively conditioning the nature of our looking. Surely these kinds of considerations are at the heart of aesthetic practice.

The Long March

Lu Jie will be talking about the long march project but it is an interesting new strategy to include here. Lu Jie's project is predicated on the belief that contemporary Chinese art as it is appearing in the international market place is not authentically Chinese but is deliberately and successfully mimicking western styles and forms while introducing local content much as China towns around the world apply a veneer of Chinoiserie over the international. His strategy is to undo the boundaries between high/low, folk/professional, rural/Urban thereby creating a kind of broth out of which a new contemporary Chinese art might arise that is not dependent on the West for authentication.

This conference is about the need for new ways to critically navigate cultural differences. Lu Jie's approach may work for China however for myself there are important residual values in the history of Western art history and theory that are still of use in coming to understand art even if only from this tradition. I can sympathise with Thomas Messer who at the end of the debate in Venice 1990 said: ***"I have spent my life working within a historical and theoretical framework which works very well when we are analysing Western works of art, and I see no reason to simply abandon that now!"***

Nicholas Bourriaud and Andrew McNamara in this conference have both referred to the fragments of the enlightenment and subsequent traditions that are still relevant. Certainly for me one important fragment from modernism is the way we constantly question our representational strategies. As a curator I take the material qualities of art works and the constant push and shove between the real and the represented, between art and life as crucial not just to art history but to the way we understand the nature of consciousness. This tradition manifested itself here in Andrew Benjamin's analysis of the lines of sight in Dürer and in Jennifer Biddle's insight into the materiality of Walpiri women's art. Such analysis incorporates the necessity of an active participating observer which for me is central to a contemporary aesthetic.

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