

Asian Art Today: Exploiting the Code A Critique from the Margins

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Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it (Fanon1991).

This is an attempt at a critical reading of Asian modernist art of the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of this century. I refer particularly to art that has been canonized as 'good' or 'new' art by art curators from the 'developed world' by way of numerous biennales, triennials, and art writings on contemporary Asian art. Through these events and writings, curators have been able to project, privilege and promote specific types of art and artists, thus identifying and declaring for Asia their 'major' artists to be celebrated. My reading is made in relation to these artists and some of their work that have been highly acclaimed by the enterprise of international art.

The title of this essay indicates that my focus of study includes the whole of Asia. I have considered extensively examples from both China and India in formulating my observations and arguments. However, I need to confess that the most familiar terrain for me is South Asia. Having said that, as demonstrated through the examples from China, the observations I present here are not peculiar and limited to the South Asian terrain.

The idea of looking critically at the global dynamics at play during the last two decades within the Asian art scene that triggered various issues and anxieties, and how Asian art has manifested in recent years had been a nagging desire for me for a long time. However, every time I felt the urge to comment on it, my precarious situation as an art practitioner who has participated in a number of major biennials and triennials in the Asia Pacific region, and the fact that I am personally known to the artists who would be the object of study to develop my critique on contemporary Asian art has made me capricious and at the same time anxious. As such, I would declare this exercise more as an attempt to define what we are doing as Asian artists or what we can do as artists in a world that is controlled and manipulated by globalized corporate capital.

The Rise and Subversion of a New Era in Asian Art

It is now a widely accepted fact that Asian art embarked upon a new era in the 1980s and in the early 1990s. The ideas and trends in art that gathered momentum during this period can be identified as the emergence of a historical avant-garde in visual arts in Asia for several reasons.¹ By the last decade of the twentieth century, modernist art in Asia was in a position to claim a history close to a century on its own terms. It was also during this very period that Asian artists began to show signs of an 'anti-institutionalism' positioned within the history of art that challenged the institutionalized autonomy of the discipline at varying degrees and scales. There have been several curatorial and scholarly attempts to record and define this important development in Asian art.² Survey exhibitions such as 'New Art from South Asia 1992' organized by the Japan Foundation, the 'Asian Art Shows' of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and scholarly book projects such as *Tradition and Change* edited by Caroline Turner, published in 1994 coinciding with the first Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art of Queensland Galleries, are some examples of such attempts.

The new work that came into prominence in these years established new ideologies that fuelled a different narrative urge which propounded a counter-tradition to the accepted norms of modernism, and the universalizing wishes of modernist art. These works interrogated and explored the social and cultural codes as well as the political affiliations of those very codes that constituted the ideologies of control, domination and exploitation. Always containing a certain cultural specificity in terms of the problematic, the thematic and the textuality, these works with their post-modernist critical edge had a local 'aura' around them. In other words, the Asian anxieties stemming from histories of colonial domination, independence struggles, contemporary dilemmas of ethnic issues, violence, political chaos and cultural confrontations in the face of global intrusions tended to inform the thematic core of most of these works. The Asian artists conspicuously predicated upon the narrative textualities of the contexts which they then examined, explored or reflected upon in the art works.

While it was the artists from Asian countries who brought in the new era, it was not they who defined and managed the new era into the future. In the absence of a serious critical discourse in contemporary art that would have consolidated the new movement, the directional guidance for contemporary Asian art was set by the art curators from the developed world, funded by wealthy museums and galleries. It is important to note that the Asian art world had no intra- or inter-regional institutional connections of any significance until the 1990s. Sri Lankan artists were totally oblivious to the changes that were occurring in India or China, while Pakistani women artists did not exist for them until as late as early 2000. It was via international curators, exhibitions and art activities curated by them that Asian artists from different regions met each other and artists' networks were established. Through a process of acknowledgement, recognition and presenting with opportunities to show Asian art in international exhibitions, international art curators played a pivotal role in consolidating the radical developments in art in Asia during the 1980s and 1990s.

In retrospect, this seems inevitable as the dawning of a new era in Asian art coincided with the dawning of another era. The 1990s marked the beginning of an era of curators. The art curators of contemporary art who emerged in the 1990s were guided by several perceived duties. If earlier curators were 'behind the scene aesthetic arbiters,' the new curators became the cultural mediators between the transnational and local. They saw themselves as

mediators between artists, art audiences and art funders. Moreover, they took it as their prerogative to present this art within and beyond the region. This phenomenon worked well for the rapid internationalization of Asian art by way of biennales, triennials, art camps and traveling exhibitions. However, there was an unavoidable drawback in this endeavor of internationalizing Asian art by curators: it took place for the benefit of art audiences in developed countries where the curators performed their work, and to support the glorification of wealthy art museums in those countries. To quote Michel Brenson, "what needs to be stated is that the increasing institutional awareness of the importance of audiences has made curator more visible as mediator between art and its public" (Brenson 1998: 16-27).

What this meant in practice was that the curators had to ensure impressive numbers of visitors to museum events so that corporate money spent on museums was justified and assured. To make sure that art audiences came to museums, the curators were forced to look for art that had potential to speak to, or amuse art audiences of the developed world. Accordingly it became apparent, although never articulated as such, that the art works finding their way into the hallowed exhibition spaces of contemporary art museums in the developed world could not be too culturally specific, and had a comfortable distance from its viewers. Asian art should enthrall the viewer but not perturb them with too much of overloaded details. The unpublicized attribute inherently possessed by these chosen Asian artworks acknowledged by the museums was the high potential of readability with an edge towards 'strangeness'.

If one were to take a critical look at the artists and the artworks that have acquired major accolades as great Asian artists and innovative Asian art, what one sees is a situation exceedingly dominated by the hegemonic cultural values and wishes of the so called 'west', the colonial and the developed (in most cases these are one and the same). The critical edge in Asian art that questioned and explored cultural codes of domination and power in their widest sense in the 1980s and early 1990s, has by now given way to passive and reified representations or narratives of Asian anxieties and histories. Asian anxieties are well packaged in digital manipulations, in exotic and craft techniques, in everyday objects and in the biographies of now non-threatening Asian *villains* such as Mahathma Gandhi and Mao Setung. What is seen now are the products (art) thus packaged, totally relying for their meaning and value upon their packaging; strikingly similar to the packaging of junk food. Here, the art audiences of the developed world are assured of enrichment of their lives through the consumption of some Asian 'cultural nutrients' while the museums and shows of contemporary Asian art are designated as places for this cultural enrichment.

If one were to take a broad look at contemporary Asian art shown at international exhibitions and reproduced in art journals and other international publications, one would see that they can be divided into two main trends:

1. The first trend represents art works that present narratives of Asian anxieties, traditions and histories of violence and suffering in a way that is highly mitigated, sanitized and made palatable to an international audience and corporate culture. Most of these artworks deliberately conceal the social and political affiliations of the cultural codes and specificities that inform their work and can be labeled as exploiting the cultural codes. My major critique of the works within this trend is that they continue to succumb to the hegemonic myth of 'modernist' art and its

extensions, and are totally the prerogative of the so called 'west'. By doing this, such works automatically endorse the precondition of a 'good' work of art to be the 'easy accessibility and translatability' to the 'western' audiences. Like golden beaches of Sri Lanka or India that are kept 'sanitized' for the enjoyment of Euro-American tourists, our art should be cleansed of any direct links with the culturally specific signs that are inherent to the anxieties examined and explored, so that such information wouldn't bother the audiences of the developed world.

2. The second trend contains artworks that became objects of 'great' art by the mere transportation of traditional or early twentieth century materials, objects and situations which constitute narratives that conform to the notions of the 'Orient,' to the clinically spotless gallery environment of wealthy museums. Such exportations of Asian situations shamelessly cater to an age old western hunger for 'anthropologizing' the Asian world and experience. The main problem of this trend is that it gives no reckoning to the agency of Asian artists in representation.

In both trends, one sees that Asian artists work more as 'cultural contractors' for art audiences of the developed world than as artists who 'interject a subjectivity that is existentially pitched' (Kapur 2000: 314). As such, these works contain no moving or critical interiors; interiors which demand an understanding of the cultural specificities of art making. Instead, they only remain within an exterior constructed by exploiting the cultural codes that comprise Asian anxieties, which by implication resemble fantasies fabricated with Asian 'narratives' for a global audience necessarily from the 'western' and developed world. In this sense, these art works are very much like the global literature formulated by Asian novelists that excel by making 'cartoonish' realities of Asian anxieties and histories (Mishra 2007: 16).

Looking at Asian mega art stars and the high profile art events of the Asia-Pacific region from a vantage point that has been only marginally associated with the major circuits of such events, we seem to be in an advantageous position to be more critical of the art today. Our predicament of not being lured by the glamour of the art world was not due to any special virtue on our part, but a privilege of being in the margins. We find that it is imperative for Asian artists to re-evaluate the politics and workings of Asian art at present, and to be aware of its shortcomings. In many ways these shortcomings deprive us of our agency and capacity to be discursive, with the resulting danger of distancing us from our own societies. Alternatively, are we to conclude that the great revolt in the visual arts in the last two decades of the twentieth century in Asia have now been tamed and remodeled in the way the 'superior other' wants us to present us to him? In the introduction to her edited volume, *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific* (an essential text in understanding Asian art), Caroline Turner states that "what Said calls the authority of the compelling image of empire overtaking so many procedures of intellectual mastery has been left behind in the new societies of the Asia-Pacific region" (Turner 2005). Sadly, this may not hold true any more as such liberating processes, or the reflections of an independent art force in relation to Asia has become another utopian myth. If such an effort were made, it was for a very brief time in the early 1990s; it now remains an unrealized dream uprooted by the Asian artists themselves within the dynamics of internationalism.

Artists as Cultural Contractors

Having stated my anxieties and critical thoughts forthrightly and somewhat unmercifully, I would now like to question my own hesitation with the idea of artists in the role of 'cultural contractors'. What are the implications for artists in thinking and working in such a role? Without formulating a direct answer to this, I would like to approach the problem from a different perspective that leaves the question unanswered to a certain extent.

Art historians and their writings have repeatedly emphasized that the primary function of the pre-modern era art was to service aesthetic desires and social needs of the wealthy and the powerful. Therefore, for the purpose of my argument, I hold that even artists under feudal conditions of the pre-modern era played the role of 'cultural contractors' in actuality. However, the difference of the pre-modern era was that the artists were not required to have, nor were obsessed with, the notion of unique and original style. At the same time, pre-modern artists were not required to be self consciously interventionist and critical. Even then, when such traits in their artistic personalities and their works existed, those were hidden under several layers of meaning-making. Since I imply that contemporary artists have again assumed the role of 'cultural contractors,' are we to conclude that modernist art has exhausted itself and come full circle? Is it making one of the basic tenants of modernist art -- artist as a self-reflective and questioning individual -- untenable and irrelevant?

Perhaps this is the hidden agenda of corporate capital of the transnational era. The re-phrasing of artists as 'cultural contractors' is not only an Asian phenomena that occurred under the tutelage of international art curators. It has its European counterparts as well, even though its manifestation is not as blatant. The Young British Artist (YBA) phenomenon of the 1990s in the UK is perhaps the best European example of such a manifestation. Some works and artists of this movement can easily be placed under the label of 'cultural contractors'.

At this moment, it is useful to reflect and understand fully the attributes of a 'cultural contractor'. A 'cultural contractor', I would suggest, self-consciously thinks in terms of power and wealth of the class owning the means of production of values /assets. Therefore, the possibilities of thinking and conceptualizing a certain narrative in terms of visual art may essentially be predetermined by the power and wealth of the class that owns the means of production of values /assets. Certain works by Damien Hirst and Marc Quinn can be taken to illustrate this aspect of the psychology of 'artist turned cultural contractors'. Hirst's work with dead animals in formaldehyde not only insists on confronting us with the brute fact of mortality at every turn, but the power of corporate capitalism confronts us with perhaps a greater force. Quinn's self portrait cast in blood also subscribes to this quite comfortably. If not for the patronage of corporate capital, conceiving of an artwork such as Quinn's, that needs an endless amount of financial support for its sustenance and function as an artwork, would not be possible. One obvious aspect of such artworks is that they radiate with a kind of snobbish arrogance by foregrounding the fact that they need a 'lot of cash' for their existence.

Similar to rituals of feudal societies, these artworks need the direct support of the owners of wealth to be conceived, produced and presented. An extreme example of such an artwork that best illustrates the mindset of an 'artist turned cultural worker' is Hirst's recent work of a jewel studded human skull. Costing a staggering fifteen million pounds as reported by CNN, the work was exhibited to a few at a time for only several minutes under heavy security. The whole scenario surrounding this work is interesting because of its similarity to the atmosphere and aura of visiting a sacred chamber. Has Hirst given rise to a very sacred object? The steps that a viewer were required to go through to see the art work, such as

staying in line, being security checked, walking through several doors, seeing the object only for a few minutes, resembles nothing but entering the sanctum sanctorum of a temple or a shrine. This opens to us a series of very interesting questions. Whose 'temple' are we stepping into? Whom are we worshipping? Who is blessed by this temple? One last question looms large: how has Hirst claimed the privilege to imagine making an artwork that would cost him fifteen million pounds? If one were to look at all the answers closely, one cannot avoid the larger than life figure of corporate capital. The high temples of corporate capital play the role of blessing artists such as Hirst to boost their power to 'imagine big.' What Hirst in reality has ended up producing is a 'disneyfied'³ ritual object and a corresponding series of ritual practices (similar to the feudal rituals of pre-modern times), to sanctify the accumulation of wealth on the one hand, and to camouflage the processes of exploitation that makes it possible to amass such excessive wealth through pseudo sanctification.

Reformulating artists as 'cultural contractors' seems to be a necessary requirement of transnational corporate capital. If Asian artists and art curators have succumbed to this by 'sanitizing' and 'disneyfying' Asian anxieties, histories, sufferings and materials, the European artists have collaborated with it by 'ritualizing' and 'disneyfing' corporate wealth. The difference between Asian and European art, or to be more specific, between the art of the developed world and the developing, is that the former sanitizes its narrative while the latter ritualizes. The main problem however, in casting artists as 'cultural contractors' is that it robs art of one of its hard won post-traditionalist truths- the possibility to be an 'artist'.

I began this essay with a quotation from Frantz Fanon as I believe that a great revolution in visual art occurred in Asia in the 1980s and 1990s which was forgotten, betrayed or not considered seriously by mid 2000 by current Asian mega art personalities and art writers. The ruptures made by artists like K. G. Subramaniam, and Gulammohamed Sheik for India that were further consolidated by artists like Bhupan Khaker, Nalini Malani, Nilma Sheik, Arpita Singh, Vivan Sundaram, Madhvi Parekh and a few others are now betrayed by many of the current superstars of Indian art by having taken a path of 'exploiting the code' rather than exploring and examining the code.⁴ The same can be said of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal to a certain degree. A critical retake on the current status of Asian art seems imperative if we are to write our history on our own terms.

End Notes

1. A discerning reader may notice that my ideas on historical avant-garde stem from Peter Burger's book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984).

2. Surprisingly, for an eminent Indian art writer like Geetha Kapur even as late as 2005 there were no artists or art worthy of her attention outside of Delhi-Bombay-Baroda circuit in South Asia. What exists for her between this Indian circuit of 'excellence' and East Asia is a culturally barren landscape. For her, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal or Sri Lanka does not exist as active participants of an Asian art scene, but India alone on one side and East Asia on the other! For more details, see Geeta Kapur, 'Dismantled Norms: Apropose other Avant-gardes' (In, Caroline Turner, Ed., *Art and Social Change*, Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005: 46-100). What is ironical in this essay concerning other avant-gardes is that Kapur, while riding on Hal Foster's position that argues for successive avant-gardes -- claims

that "avant-garde is historically conditioned phenomenon which emerges only in a moment of real political disjuncture, (and) it will appear in various forms in different parts of the world at different times" (2005: 57), and fails or avoids looking around South Asia for similar movements. However, she seems quite versatile on Thai, Philippine, Indonesian and Chinese art and artists. Kapur's complete disregard for art movements in South Asia other than the Delhi-Bombay-Baroda circuit destabilizes the politics of her arguments that intend to confront the hegemony of the Euro-American art and art history writing practices. This complete disregard for, and silence on, the art movements in South Asia implies a hegemonic position for India in relation to South Asia, and she as a 'producer of knowledge' casts herself a colonialist of a kind.

3. 'Disneyfication' is a word coined to infer situations that resembles the fabricated fantasies of Disneyland.

4. For more information, see Geeta Kapur's essay, 'When was Modernism in Indian Art?' (In, *When was Modernism*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000). This essay by Geeta Kapur can be considered an important piece of writing though written in the convoluted language of the subaltern studies specialists. It contains a whole range of extremely penetrating insights on modernism/ postmodernism in art in South Asia. Perhaps it may be due to this extremely arrogant, dis-communicative and elitist use of language of the white master that most Indian artists and art curators have not been able to internalize the very crucial and pertinent issues that she has raised in this essay.

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