

At the Edge: Rediscovering 'Elsewhere' through the Hybrid Artistry of the Disparate

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A showcase of contemporary art from across the Asia-Pacific, *Edge of Elsewhere* occasions a concurrence of the traditional and the post-modern in the exhibition of artworks that reflexively question the colonialist hegemony that modernism imposed from the West. Through the iteration of culturally diverse ideas in new artistic languages devised by the marginalised, this microcosmic space in Sydney's geographic periphery retreats from the modern centrality of the artist and the corporeality of art to reveal it as discursively constructed and subject to fluctuation and change. As such it is a seminal space, which, through collaborative opportunity, empowers those who have been disparagingly labelled as the 'other' to re-immense in their traditional past and react to the present in transcendent form.

Introduction

When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just 'others', that we ourselves are an 'other' among others (Ricoeur 1961, p.278).

As part of a three-year curatorial endeavour to transport international art to Sydney's geographic periphery, Campbelltown Arts Centre hosted the *Edge of Elsewhere* exhibition for the second time this year in conjunction with the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney. As a divisional component of this artistic agenda, the exhibition heralds works devised by ethnically diverse contemporary artists, some of which were commissioned through an active engagement with a community that is one of Sydney's most culturally hybrid. As such, the exhibition features a cacophonous blend of traditional artistic thought, contextualised through culturally diverse experiences, and yet highly relevant to the present moment, wherein the disparate "struggle to maintain an identity that affords them little more than the dubious distinction of being 'the other's other'" (Mane-Wheoki in Herle 1995, p.405).

This hybridity renders the exhibition post-disciplinary plural and exemplifies a harmonic collaboration of the seemingly disparate phenomena of cultural traditionalism and post-modernity. It shies away from previous attempts at cultural essentialism by Thomas (1994, p. 187), constructed primarily in terms of 'difference' and which make stoic pre-existing archaic stereotypes, to create a microcosmic space in which tradition can rather become the nucleus for a postmodernist rethinking of modern cultural ideals, thus giving substance to the desublimation of meaning and destruction of form, of which, on their own, "an emancipatory effect will not follow" (Habermas 1983, p.11).

The death of history

"Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth" (Schweitzer 2003, p. 314).

The progressivist ideals at the crux of modernity have permeated scientific, technical and political rationality since finding force in the principles of the Enlightenment (Olsson, Lecture, 7 March). According to Gillen and Ghosh (2006, pp.8-25) the grand narrative of modernist history saw

exert “a sort of attrition or wearing away at the expense of the cultural resources which have made the great civilizations of the past” (Ricoeur 1961, pp.276-7). The same modernist ideals that fuelled this empiricism have later been cognitive in the spread of dominant hegemonic forces such as globalisation and capitalism that have led to an en masse basic consumer culture, that is, the “spreading before our eyes of a mediocre civilization which is the absurd counterpart of...elementary culture” (Ricoeur 1961, pp.276-7).

The artworks presented in *Edge of Elsewhere* reveal meta-narratives of civilizations dismissed under the dogma of Western ethnocentrism and Social Darwinism as being “a deviation, less advanced, primitive, or, at best, exotically interesting at a safe distance” (van Eyck 1962, p.283). Empowered by notions of post-modernity in which art is viewed as a ‘multi-layered phenomenon’, and imbued with complex and relational sets of meanings which transcend mimicry, a multiplicity of historical ‘truths’ transcend the pontifical assumptions of the colonialist. In spite of the dominance of the mercurial processes of modernism, conceptualised as “a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal”, the works presented reveal the continuity of cultural tradition in streams of art (Berman 1983, p.15).

While they may be born of the teleological remnants of past generations, these traditions maintain their relevance, revealing the ‘present moment’ “as a continuum of historical forces through time” (Rath 2006, p.32). The assumption that that which is stoic will become ossified, commiserated by Marx (1985, p.83) in his ‘Communist Manifesto’, is shown to have been a falsity. The art, through the prism of a pluralistic postmodernism, instead reveals discourses of culture as “ambiguous and historically mutable instruments”, it reveals identity as subject to fluctuation and change (Thomas 1994, p.188). Traditions become icons, where those traditions displaced or oppressed by modernist regimes seek to construct a self through and in art that is not constrained by an institutionalised process of thought, nor subject to the presuppositions of conventional multiculturalism which has reified minority status and degenerative stereotypes (Thomas 1994, p.187). Instead, the artists have transcended the notions of ‘race’ and ‘culture’ bound in language by using expressive and performative mediums to problematize empirically organised processes of thought to change the world-view of the spectators to one which embraces the plethora of narratives, of histories, which circulate in our lives (Latour’s ‘modern constitution’ in Latour 1993, pp.29-39).

‘The limits of my language are the limits of my mind’ (Wittgenstein in Olsson, Lecture, 14 March)

“Postmodern knowledge [*le savoir postmoderne*] is not simply an instrument of power. It refines our sensitivity to differences and increases our tolerance of incommensurability” (Lyotard in Habermas 1983, p.278).

Upon entering the exhibition a central wall is dominated by a Quicktime film by Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries. A sensory challenge, the film is a series of fast paced slides set to an original score that is arresting in its aural monotony. Entitled *Campbell’s Soup Town*, it is a collaborative piece and the result of workshops conducted by this two-artist collective. A number of ethnically diverse community participants were empowered to explore the notion of ‘what it means to be an artist’, while learning how to ‘create’ using Flash animation techniques. A configuration of the one liners, prose poetry, observations, anecdotes, dreams and fantasies submitted by the participants in response to their interpretation of a ‘future city’, it offers insight into the boundless limits of art and self-expression.

Post-modern art is characterised by its alterity. It consists of elements that are “hybrid rather than ‘pure’, compromising rather than ‘clean’, ‘ambiguous’ rather than ‘articulated’, perverse as well as interesting” (Danto 1997, p.12). As such, *Campbell’s Soup Town* is a postmodern instance of pluralistic intention that dissolves the empirical intentions of modern art with its swift irrationality. If ‘the limits of my language are the limits of my mind’ as stated by Danto (1997, p.15), then the

contemporary discourses that defy quantification and yet reveal an omnipresent awareness that it is through this 'incommensurability' that we can construct a subjective and socio-historically present self.

This realisation is a continuing paradigm that permeates the seminal space of the gallery. However, the artworks also extend beyond the multifarious cultural and geographic realities of the artists themselves to reveal extensive collaboration with various communal groups. In doing so the gallery becomes a space wherein the constraints of ethnicity, exemplified in the boundaries of language, are overcome through the over-arching, illimitable joy of art making.

Autarkical art and contemporary materiality

The liberative importance of the tactile resides in the fact that it can only be decoded in terms of experience itself: it cannot be reduced to mere information, to representation or to the simple evocation of a simulacrum substituting for absent presences (Frampton, 1983, p.28).

The tribal economies of the South Pacific continue to use forms of 'non-monetary' exchange, that is, custom currency, in the form of Ngatu (tapa) paintings, along with shell money, pandanus mats and Tusker pigs. Such items are often exchanged as dowry or at important social rites such as funerals, weddings or births. Newell Harry's *Untitled (suite of works and artefacts)* is an installation that draws together a new Ngatu painting produced in collaboration with the Tongan Minto-based women's group 'Liahona', and uses a number of the utilitarian artefacts used in the production of Ngatu paintings, which were gifted to the artist on a research trip to Tonga. Alongside these artefacts, we find an adorned BMX bicycle, bartered by the artist for his own mountain bike with a friend from Ohien village in Port Villa, Vanuatu.

While the identity reflective nature of Harry's work reveals it as a multi-layered phenomenon and a realisation of the traditional and contemporary discourses that influence his physical and social reality, it is also a wider examination of notions of value in non-Western economies and the subsequent complexity of inter-cultural exchange. By exhibiting the exuberant manifestation along with the traditional and mundane artefacts that go towards the commission of culturally significant works of art, Harry deconstructs the conceptual limits of modern art practices, which concern themselves with "the material infrastructure of art-making" (Stimson and Sholette 2007, p.5).

The commodification and corporeality of the ideological artworks that have largely dressed the walls of modern museums would thus seem to be far removed from the works presented in 'Edge of Elsewhere', which celebrate traditional practices of art-making as thoroughly consistent with the reactionary streams of the postmodern in art which declare that "there is no a priori constraint on how works of art must look – they can look like anything at all" (Danto, 1997, p.16).

The works thus refuse to be realised as singularly dimensional and insouciantly free themselves from any constraints of space and time to be realised as borne of experience. Dacchi Dang's *Phoenix 2011* is another work that explicates this through a haunting 3-channel video production.

A member of the Vietnamese diaspora, Dang draws from the exodus experiences of refugees to create a work symbolic of lost connections and reconnections to culture, language and homeland. Looming from three walls in a darkroom, one screen presents a fleet of paper boats floating in disquieting silence. A film of traditional Vietnamese artefacts being melted consumes a wall to its right, while a traditional Vietnamese dancer performs mutely on a third. Perceiving the role that information, media and technology play in the construction of meaning and self in the contemporary world, the post-modern repetition of muted scenes of cultural dislocation, disintegration and renewal evocatively move the viewer into a transient state. In doing so this work is able to engage the viewer in a way that transgresses the material conventions of modern art, the

“untouchableness of complete autonomy” (Habermas 1983, p.10), and create a meaningful multimedia artwork.

A creative riposte

But in order to take part in modern civilization, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandon of a whole cultural past. It is a fact: every culture cannot sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilization (Ricoeur 1961, pp.276-7).

Foundational to the persistent emphasis on the symbolic potential for the traditional to shape a socio-historical contemporary self, the ideas inherent in ‘Edge of Elsewhere’ are also a powerful political show of the dysfunctionality of modernist regimes. Their oppressive heterogeneity across time is revealed as trenchantly responsible for the lack of identity of which ethnic groups and migrants across the Asia-Pacific are now trying to cure themselves.

Postmodernism’s “re-audition of the oppositional voices of black and ethnic cultures” as stated by Jameson (1981, p.84) is revealed on a confronting scale in Richard Bell and Emory Douglas’ *Peace Heals, War Kills (Big Ass Mutha Fuckin Mural)*. Shown in conjunction with Emory Douglas’ revolutionary silkscreen prints from the decade of the 1960’s, which agitated for political and social change in America, it is a communally produced manifestation of the contemporary concerns of the indigenous in Australia and the African-American in the USA. Presenting an emaciated figure, the work problematises the empirical faith of modernism in ‘progress’ and the advancement of the ‘superior’ Western man, which instituted the construction of the ‘other’; Hegel’s class of ‘people’s without history’ (Gillen and Ghosh, 2006, p.33). The result of this according to Thomas (1994, p.184) was to create a “plethora of narratives of national identity... circulating in a conflicted field” whereby ethnic individuals on the edge of society were starved of a conception of their identity and traditional locality.

The works presented by persistent community voices of these disparate groups are a reflexive deconstruction of modern ‘races’, and rather an explication of a ‘people’ that, “we have multiple genetic and cultural heritages, but one identity” (McDaniel, lecture, 17th May).

At the same time, the contradictory and cyclical nature of Pacific history is revealed through the video installation titled *PoviVasa* which deals with the complications catalysed in the ‘first contact’ movements and subsequently continued through colonisation. A series of sculptures and performances encompassed in a video installation, the poignant film largely focuses on a bull made of Pisupo tin cans, a brand of tinned beef that is a major dietary staple for Pacific people. The post-modern nature of ‘unreality’ is employed in the use of video, while the disconcertingly repetitious dance of the metaphorical sculpted bull creates a ‘spectacle’ which questions, through performativity, the empirical knowledge of the coloniser in introducing non-indigenous ‘false idols’ to the cultural landscape of the Pacific. The detrimental effects that modern industrialization and urbanization had on the fragile island eco-systems of the Pacific is reflexively brought to the fore in this disquieting piece.

A co-conspiratorial phenomenon

“The move towards collectives can be seen as a response to the rootless individualism associated with industrialization and urbanization and, less reactively, it flows towards a notion of collective individuation around a catalysing point” (Massumi 2002, p.71).

A thematic constant that has already been revealed as permeating the works inherent in the ‘Edge of

perceive the conjunction of seemingly disparate phenomena as microcosmic of a changing contemporary reality, is the emphasis on community collaboration in art-making. The modernist positing of the centrality of the artist is reflexively deconstructed in each of these works, most of which are the product of many hands and minds.

Of particular significance is the *Conversation Room*, a space conceived by Phaptawan Suwannakudt. When a seat is free, viewers are invited to sit at a table and work on the piece of shredded silk that has been placed there. They can create with it; knotting or knitting, or drawing or writing on it, before leaving the fabric for the next viewer who enters the space. The creation of such an installation deconstructs the empirical myth of the 'artist', by revealing art as a discursive conception of our individual minds. The process of strangers working alone but opposite and in conjunction with one another is also metaphorical of the invisible threads of connection in society, through which we can acknowledge one another as a simultaneous creator of their own space.

As such, this work reveals the parallel concerns of the other collaborative pieces, which encourage community participation, in the creation of art that conveys a socio-historical meaning that extends beyond the discursive experience of the singular artist. These communally constructed works can thus be realised more profoundly. While this is reflective of a contemporary 'post-studio' climate, the collaborative process is also employed as a possibility for connection and reparation (Adamson 2007, p.171). The displaced, who have been regarded as belonging to "community without propinquity" to use the terms of van Eyck (1962, p.283), come together in the act of art-making to "push beyond the assumptions and expectations of the founding generation to see art as an ongoing, historically rooted phenomenon that plays an active role in... new national, regional and global configurations" (Herle et al, 2002, p.11). By sharing the experience and the joy of art-making with members of their community, the artists not only find a cultural self by engaging in the long-standing traditional practice of skill-sharing in endeavours, but confront with a strength of coalition the political assumptions and degenerative conditions that they wish to alter. Thus the political rebelliousness of group activity inherent in previous post-modern movements can be seen to operate through the resurgence of traditional practice to create an opportunistic transcendence of artistic expression.

Conclusion

"We are in a kind of lull or interregnum in which we can no longer practice the dogmatism of a single truth and in which we are not yet capable of conquering the scepticism into which we have stepped" (Habermas 1983, p.283).

According to Danto (1997, p.13), the past 25 years has seen "tremendous experimental productiveness" in postmodern art, an assertion which notably coincides with the notion that "during the past 25 years there has been a quiet revolution in how indigenous peoples, art historians, anthropologists, artists, museums and curators view, analyse, interpret and understand Pacific Art of all kinds" (Herle et al. 2002, p.1). The 'Edge of Elsewhere' exhibition reveals the present moment as one in which marginalised artists, giving voice to wider cultural communities and empowered by the opportunity of post-modernism, are ready to move beyond the 'interregnum' caused by modernity and effect a positive change.

Through the analysis of the artworks, the assumed disparity of the post-modern and the traditional is bridged by a common philosophical desire to realise our contemporary selves and the spaces we occupy as ones which are influenced by a plethora of discourses and can escape the heterogeneity imposed by modernism. The microcosmic constitution of works in a gallery reveals the ability for a contemporaneous present to mend the ties that once existed between culture and society.

Postmodernism is driven by the insight that our understanding and our knowledge are organised in a certain way, and that a change in the organization of our theories changes our ways of world

culture that are a source of stress and pressure for us all” as described by Hendin, (1958, p. 523), then ‘Edge of Elsewhere’ reveals that now is the time for rethinking the reified everyday praxis of modernity. The interplay of traditional ideals and notions of postmodernity in the art thus reflexively question the ‘modern constitution’ (Latour 1993, pp.29-39) and change the organised processes of thought, which are institutionally driven, to subsequently change the world-view of the spectators.

Notes on the contributor

Taryn Priadko is a student of Communication and Law at the University of Technology in Sydney. Choosing to study Writing and Cultural Studies as her major, she is intrigued by the influence that seemingly transient ideas have played on the production of culturally significant works, and was thus attracted to the exhibition of contemporary art from across the Asia-Pacific that was on display at *The Edge of Elsewhere*.

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