

The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro, Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

This book examines how we can conceive of a 'postcolonial museum' in the contemporary epoch of mass migrations, the internet and digital technologies. The authors consider the museum space, practices and institutions in the light of repressed histories, sounds, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures. Focusing on the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, is to propose a living archive formed through creation, participation, production and innovation. The aim is to propose a critical assessment of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that challenge the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought. This involves a search for new strategies and critical approaches in the fields of museum and heritage studies which will renew and extend understandings of European citizenship and result in an inevitable re-evaluation of the concept of 'modernity' in a so-called globalised and multicultural world.

Long overdue, here is a volume that updates and reconfigures the intersection of postcolonial critique with multiple interpretations of the museum and social praxis in globalisation. The Postcolonial Museum charts gaps, achievements and prospects in 20 chapters that re-interpret the connection of past and current imperialisms. Introducing a wealth of new voices, this is essential reading for anyone interested in curatorial practice and theory, modern and contemporary art, ethnography, museology and the interventionist potential of research in the humanities overall.

Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK

Cover image: *The Tomb of Qara Kóz* by Ronni Ahmmed and Ebadur Rahman, Venice Biennale, Lido, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and the curator, Ebadur Rahman.

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Chambers, De Angelis, Ianniciello,
Orabona and Quadraro

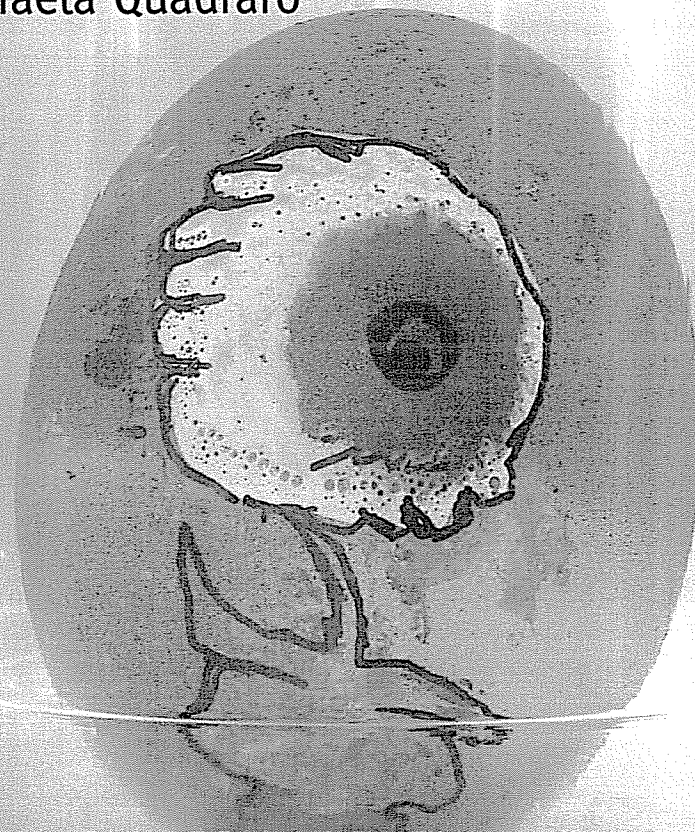
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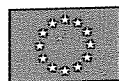
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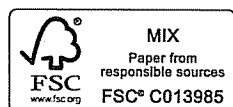
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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix

Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality <i>Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro</i>	1
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PART I: GLOBAL MIGRATIONS, TRANSCULTURAL HERITAGE

1 A Museum Without Objects <i>Françoise Vergès</i>	25
2 Decolonising National Museums of Ethnography in Europe: Exposing and Reshaping Colonial Heritage (2000–2012) <i>Felicity Bodenstern and Camilla Pagani</i>	39
3 Colonial Spaces, Postcolonial Narratives: The Exhibitionary Landscape of Fort Cochin in India <i>Neelima Jeychandran</i>	51
4 Ethnographic Museums: From Colonial Exposition to Intercultural Dialogue <i>Fabienne Boursiquot</i>	63

PART II: ARTISTIC INCURSIONS IN SPACE AND TIME

5 'There is Not Yet a World' <i>Ebadur Rahman</i>	75
6 The Artist as Interlocutor and the Labour of Memory <i>Mihaela Brebenel, Christopher Collier and Joanna Figiel</i>	89

- 7 Performance in the Museum Space (for a Wandering Society) 99
Margherita Parati

PART III: DISORIENTING THE MUSEUM

- 8 *Museo Diffuso*: Performing Memory in Public Spaces 111
Viviana Gravano
- 9 Mining the Museum in an Age of Migration 125
Anne Ring Petersen
- 10 Blurring History: The Central European Museum and the Schizophrenia of Capital 137
Ivan Jurica
- 11 The Limits to Institutional Change: Organisational Roles and Roots 147
Peggy Levitt

PART IV: REPRESENTATION AND BEYOND

- 12 The Incurable Image: Curation and Repetition on a Tri-continental Scene 161
Tarek Elhaik
- 13 The Postcolonial 'Exhibitionary Complex': The Role of the International Expo in Migrating and Multicultural Societies 175
Stefania Zuliani
- 14 Orientalism and the Politics of Contemporary Art Exhibitions 185
Alessandra Marino
- 15 What Museum for Africa? 195
Itala Vivan

PART V: FUTURE MEMORIES, ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVES

- 16 *Egyptian Chemistry*: From Postcolonial to Post-humanist Matters 209
Ursula Biemann
- 17 'The Lived Moment': New Aesthetics for Migrant Recollection 219
Peter Leese
- 18 Coding/Decoding the Archive 229
David Gauthier and Erin La Cour
- Afterword: After the Museum 241
Iain Chambers
- Index* 247

Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality

Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona
and Michaela Quadraro

Postcolonial art is intimately linked to globalisation – that is, to a critical reflection on the planetary conditions of artistic production, circulation and reception. This implies focusing on the interweaving of the geographical, cultural, historical and economic contexts in which art takes place. The relationship between globalisation and art, as Okwi Enwezor observes, conceived and institutionalised by the European history of modern art in terms of separation or simply negation, here acquires fundamental importance (Enwezor 2003). It represents both the premise through which the relationship between art and the postcolonial can be conceptualised, and the matrix that helps to convey the cultural and political value of this relationship, together with its significance as a *disruptive encounter*. Far from being lost in the sterile and abstract, yet provincial, mirror of self-referentiality masked as universalism – with the implicit claim of the autonomy and independence of art from other cultural forms and activities – postcolonial art is deeply and consciously embedded in historicity, globalisation and social discourse. On one hand, it reminds us of how power is organic to the constitution of the diverse relations and asymmetries that shape our postcolonial world, and hence of how ‘bringing contemporary art into the geopolitical framework that defines global relations offers a perspicacious view of the postcolonial constellation’ (Enwezor 2003, 58). On the other hand, postcolonial art also shows how aesthetics today presents itself as an incisive critical instance. Postcolonial art proposes new paradigms of both signification and subjectivation, offering alternative interpretative tools that promote a reconfiguration of a planetary reality.

Analysing the link between modernity and this global reality, we can say that globalisation can be understood as the planetary ‘expansion of trade and its grip on the totality of natural resources, of human production, in a word of living in its entirety’ (Mbembe 2003). It was inaugurated by the Occident through a violent process of expropriation, appropriation and an exasperated defence of property, spread globally through capitalism and its imperialist extension. This is a political economy that is deeply rooted in, and sustained by, the humanist, rationalist, colonialist and nationalist culture of the West. The central phenomenon of modernity, born in a historical exercise of power, was fed by the religion of ‘progress’ and the racist ideology of ‘white supremacy’ imposing itself for centuries as a universal ontological category through the institutions of laws,

Chapter 5

'There is Not Yet a World'¹

Ebadur Rahman

Prologue

The Minister of Propaganda of Gulmoher Republic, a fluid network hub of Bengali artists, vehemently denied any constitutional doxa. He invoked a Deleuzian trope, 'faciality', and likened any formal rigidity, notion of hexes or ideological allegiance to a facialised re-enactment, inscribed on a colonial grid. The dominant subject, the colonisers and the slave owners, formulates the Other as a coherent identity-formation, based on a hierarchy of incongruity from the white man's face, and redeems this idea of the identity of the oppressed in objects: art, literature, iconography.

To quote Gilles Deleuze: 'This machine is called the faciality machine because it is the social production of face, because it performs the facialisation of the entire body and all its surroundings and objects, and the landscapification of all worlds and milieus' (Deleuze 1996, 181). According to the Minister of Propaganda of Gulmoher Republic, if faciality is a counter-dialectical machine to maintain the marriage of the coloniser's apparatus of domination with his face, then Gulmoher Republic is an erotic state, Gulmoher Republic is a perennial erection looking for the face to penetrate and pulverise its doxic closure.

The Dominant Subject, the locus of material and spiritual signification, represents the colonial subject as object, in order to gain control over the world; the coloniser – here, perhaps, it is helpful to include in our discussion what Samir Amin calls 'internal colonising' – inscribing names and the category of things, reinstates the Other as an object of his knowledge (Amin 1976).

According to its Communique #8, Gulmoher Republic is a networked viral expansion loop to disrupt 'knowledges' and 'histories' by inaugurating haptic resonances in aesthetic experience. Gulmoher Republic brings the foci of the a-subjective realm of 'becoming' and its primal absence of order into the field of culture production. Gulmoher Republic has attempted to illuminate a particular moment, when both Kapitalist-corporate time and occidental 'History'-making ('History'-keeping and art-making related to these 'Histories', body and gesture) have become particularly problematic in the Subcontinent.

Given the dominant academic grids, regardless of places as different as Dhaka, Delhi or Darfur, the reception of 'History' invariably alludes to the dominant ways of knowing and thinking about the history of practices – an affirmation of the idealised, settled, schematic and totalised transcendental signifieds generated

1 Artaud (1995).

by the power elites. Time and again, in its critical literature, Gulmoher Republic reiterates these questions: Can an 'underdeveloped', 'Third World' woman be the ethical subject of History? Can the 'Other' from the position of a meta-historical outreach write history? Can the Woman/Other create art within History, or does she have to initiate her own brand of 'Art History'? What is art which has to operate outside history or has to resist art-as-an-aesthetic-project in order to, as Heidegger puts it, be-in-the-world?

The Citizens of the Womb

In a recent pop-up exhibition held in Mahasthangarh amid medieval ruins which are the mythical site of the marriage of Behula, 11 kilometres north of the largest colonial mint town famous for manufacturing the best silver coins during the Raj, Gulmoher Republic started the festivity with a mixed-double Badminton tournament for madrasa students, with Wagner playing in the background. In between games, there were short talks and poetry readings in memory of the brilliant hacker, Internet activist and one of the founders of Creative Commons, Aaron Swartz, who had committed suicide a couple of days before. The show consisted of 23 newspaper tents, an attempted replica of the nomadic Palestinian village Bab al-Shams which had been demolished by the Israeli army even before Gulmoher Republic's exhibition dismantled.²

The poster for the show quoted Irene Nasser, a village co-ordinator of Bab al-Shams: 'Our goal is to create facts on the ground, just as the military are always creating their own facts on the ground with settlements and outposts' (Nasser 2013). The exhibition featured photographs of leftist activists – including Mofakkar Chowdhury, the Secretary General of the Sarbahara Party of East Bengal – who were kidnapped by the paramilitary force Rapid Action Battalion in 2004 and killed in alleged crossfire. 'We are forced to borrow and utilise a lexicon of tools taken from the so called contemporary or post modernist corpus to understand and absorb, and of course, to resist, contemporary art's historical and discursive aggression,' proclaims the Republic's Minister of Propaganda.³

2 Adam Shatz, in his post 'Opening the Gate of the Sun', wrote: 'At 2.30 on Sunday morning, the Israeli army removed 250 Palestinians from Bab al-Shams, a village in the so-called E1 corridor: 13 square kilometres of undeveloped Palestinian land between East Jerusalem and Ma'ale Adumim, an Israeli settlement in the West Bank with a population of 40,000. ... Bab al-Shams took its name from Elias Khoury's epic novel, published in 1998. In the book, *Bab al-Shams* – "the gate of the sun" – is a secret cave where a Palestinian fighter, Yunis, and his wife, Nahilah, meet to make love. Khoury is accustomed to this sort of confusion. He did much of his research for Gate of the Sun in Lebanon's refugee camps, where he collected oral testimony about the Nakba. By Sunday morning they were all gone, and Bab al-Shams had returned to the land of dreams' (Shatz 2013).

3 Author's interview with Gulmoher Republic's Minister of Propaganda.

Evidently all the borrowed instruments were not equally efficacious and the difficulty of absorbing post-modernist/Historical tools could only be treated strategically, through various ingenious culture-specific procedures; Action Féminine was required to take into account the accumulation of the body of effects and implicit references already instituted by other artists. Here we can recall Baruch Spinoza or Emmanuel Lévinas, who had come upon similar difficulties; they were often forced to use Greek signifiers – logos – in order to gain entry into ideas of the Other who, essentially, is not Greek. Lévinas, in particular, initiated a practice of constantly transforming strategic negotiation: a strategy that is essentially plural, differentiated, self-conscious about and resistant to the network in which it finds itself caught.

We clearly locate the utopian traces of the work of visionaries like Isidore Isou, Yves Cline, Robert Filliou, Joseph Beuys, Eikoh Hosoe, Yayoi Kusama, Tatsumi Hijikata, Safdar Hashmi, Chitrakha, Vivan Shundaram, Rummana Hussain and others in Gulmoher Republic's staging of oppositional communication *contra* the statist power by questioning the paradigm of disciplinary societies and the *techné* of control of the individual body and the bodies of information. By cross-connecting the power-configuration of the systems – imposed by the state and the corporations – between the gaze of surveillance and the surveilled, the visible and invisible, vigilance and violation, the inner and outer coherence of the temporal fabric and the changing relationship with surveilled reality, Gulmoher Republic promoted a confrontation of the relationship between subject and object.

Without listing all 30 artists represented in the exhibition, a few examples will suffice to signal the premise and the scope of Gulmoher Republic's radical opening up of a vision – contradicting the logic that continues with the anti-realist trends of Continental philosophy obsessed with discourse, text, culture, consciousness, power or ideas as to what constitutes reality and remains unable to forward a more sophisticated critique of humanity's place in the world and of the self-enclosed Cartesian subject *vis-à-vis* the total collapse of civil society, the convergence of technological and political fascism and ecological catastrophe – towards an 'object-oriented metaphysics', to use a portmanteau trope made popular by Graham Harman (2011).

The outstanding video installation *The Citizens of the Womb* by 2 Anonymous Artists is a direct intervention in the public discourse of biopower and media: TV news, reality show, citizens' journalism, surveillance, rights, constitution and legality. Documented through a series of fractured moving images, *The Citizens of the Womb* inserts a different kind of presence, a presence not of the banality of evil, but of a lacuna. *The Citizens of the Womb* turns an unblinking gaze on the brutal killing of Bisyajit Das, a Hindu man living in old Dhaka, by a group of student cadres of the ruling party, in front of the police and the media; as soon as the onslaught of the images breaks through our ocular inhibitions, real-life footage of another brutal murder, of Rohingya refugees, is mobilised.

Roland Barthes noted that rather than meaning coming from the objects photographed, these induce associations of ideas and inaugurate a process of

signification, controlled by politics, stable to a degree which allows them to be constituted into a ready-made semiology. Power relations and the meaning generated are a transcendental horizon which makes our reality meaningful, and when we are deprived of this transcendental network – that is, of the fantastic coordinates of meaning – we are no longer engaged participants in the world, we find ourselves confronted with things in their nominal dimension. For a moment, we see them the way they are, in themselves, independently of us – or, as Marcel Proust put it in a wonderful formula, as the spectators of our own absence.

The photographic tableaux of 2 Anonymous Artists' video installation short-circuited the Bengali nationalist notions of secularism and justice. 'Bishwajit was bleeding profusely. And when some people tried to stop the attackers, the student said, Bishwajit was an Islamist. Bishwajit told them, "Brother, I am not an Islamist. I am Hindu, I am Hindu." But his voice was feeble, and the students continued hitting and hacking at him,' said Anisul, a roadside vendor. Even though no state can truly negotiate the institution of state and the myths and fantasies organised around the idea of state, the killing of Bisyajit Das upbraids the foundational myth of Bangladesh: a Hindu killed by Muslims in a secular state; a 24-year-old minority tailor killed by the cadres of the ruling government party goons on 10 December, on Human Rights Day, five days before Bangladesh's national victory day.

Through the lens of the unconscious libidinal economy, the blood-stained shirt on Bisyajit immediately brings to mind the shirts of the martyrs of the liberation war of 1971, dark-red heart-blood, stories of ethnic cleansing by the Pakistani army, in Bangladesh; footage of death camps. Except that here the dynamics are reversed: the party which led the Bengali nationalist war in 1971 has unleashed its armed cadres on the minority citizens and common people. Such a reading is not a simple de-sublimation, a reduction and unpacking of an ideological formation to its lower economic or libidinal cause; the aim of such an approach is, rather, the inherent decentring of the status of a certain reality, which brings to light its disavowed presuppositions and consequences. It offers a praxis of change and redemption by revising power's grand narrative and proposing at least two things: (1) that historical moments should be pluralistic micro narratives plotted as confrontations rather than as transition, and (2) that such confrontations with power are signalled by a functional change in the sign-system.

2 Anonymous Artists' bold installation performed a shift in perspective and located the agency of change in the insurgent desire that morphs into political signifiers in the social text of contemporary Bangladesh. Of course, photograph and film are privileged instruments of such an approach. Their purpose is not to illuminate a standard text or ideological formation, but to foment a force of crisis. This is the case with the second part of the video, that consists solely in the doubly inscribed signifying material, which confronts hidden presuppositions about the Rohingya refugees and their criminality – Rohingya being a group of people living in the northwest Burmese-Arakan region who happen to be ethnically Bengali and Muslim, and who in the last couple of decades have crossed the border to enter Bangladesh to escape the atrocities of the Burmese army but, due to Bangladesh

government's policy of 'pushback', their legal position is tenuous in this country – and what Durkheimian sociology calls a 'collective representation'.

Slavoj Žižek noted that the detective in a classical genre novel or a film processes the scene of murder as a bricolage of heteronomous elements; the connection between the murderer's *mise-en-scène* and the real events corresponds exactly to the manifest dream content and the latent frame, or the immediate figuration of the 'rebus' and its solution (Žižek 1992). 2 Anonymous Artists' performance subtracts the fantasy object from reality; it is not the observed reality that changes, but the observing subject himself: Bisyajit Das is reduced to a gaze observing how things look in his own absence. *The Citizens of the Womb* attempts to be the site of absence, a place of the displacement of function between sign-systems and, in no small way, their ruptures in the Subcontinental context and in the transaction between past and future. It is amazing that in their statements and interviews, the curators of Gulmoher Republic concealed the fact that the main item of their investigation is what Nietzsche would have called a *fortgesetzte Zeichenkette*: a continuous sign-chain. Gulmoher Republic sets up a dynamic with *The Citizens of the Womb*, in the context of the show, to break up and re-link the chain to perhaps create a possibility for a new meaning.

This is a fairly typical mode of interpreting *The Citizens of the Womb*. A typical post-structural unpacking seeks to reveal a further encrypted diminution that is attached to the chosen signifier: the pathological might be recognisable in the visual, but only once a latent menace has been interpreted can this other sense of the signification be exposed. Reiterating the point of the 'speculative turn' of Gulmoher Republic's recycled innovation, let us revisit a series of photos – the photocopied faces of murdered armed revolutionaries or common people killed by the state: mere collateral damage – with a massively ironical title, 'Underground chic', that is carefully and strategically plastered on the newspaper tents. This offers viewers a glimpse of a very unfashionable, anti-representational politics by placing some of the photos' subjects – for example, Felani, a young Bangladeshi girl killed by the Indian border guards who hung her body from a barbed-wire-post in the no man's land of the India-Bangladesh border – in a minefield of muted power relations. To invoke Michel Foucault, that would be in a 'lacunary and shredded enunciative field', where fragments of the stated and the largely silenced cut across structures and constructions of knowing (Foucault 1984).

Appropriating the theoretical apparatus and contemporary hagiography of 'Underground chic' risks misreading and obliterating the radical alterity and different political space that is magnetised, circularised and polarised by the photographers and curators of Gulmoher Republic. It was particularly interesting to read how the referents of 'Underground chic' intermingle their discourses in a circular, musical compulsion. 'Underground chic' inaugurated a contrast between 'structuring absence' and pure absence which allows the cartographic signals of revolutionary subjectivity to emerge: not unlike Indian classical music, Raga, revolutionary subjectivity hinges on an absent tonal structure or notes. The revolutionary subject emerges when its objectal counterpart (in this case, Felani or

other murder victims) disappears or is forcefully erased, while remaining effective/active in its absence. The revolutionary subject is correlative to a disappeared object whose existence is purely spiritual or ideal.

A common thread among most of the photographers of 'Underground chic' was Nan Goldin's brand of snapshot aesthetic, but unlike Nan – a 'monster' in the sense Georges Bataille (1992) utilised the word – these photographers have not produced an *oeuvre* or relentlessly personal body of images that awaken deep empathy. 'Underground chic' was more coldly strategic in quietly placing itself in a lineage of 'invisible' artists. This leads to a comparison with Valentine de Saint-Point, lover and model of Rodin and Alphonse Mucha, a photographer and a futurist theoretician who composed the notorious *Futurist Manifesto of Lust* (1913) and the *Manifesto of Futurist Women* (1912). She really begged to be enfranchised, resisting the aggressive apparatuses of *pouvoir/savoir* by softly staging a promiscuous intertextuality and interdependency between systems of representation at the opposite ends of the hierarchy of Western aesthetics and cultural values.

Put simply, 'Underground chic' and Gulmoher Republic's polluted portrayal of the 'not yet' people (and places) – to cite John Stuart Mill (2002), who denounced Africans and Indians as 'not yet' real people ready for autonomy – is that of a 'rude' nation, from the disorganised anterior of a Euro-eccentric culture, sophisticatedly decoding and critiquing the hegemonic model and the aesthetic ideal(s) of the Occident that presents itself as the definitive civilisational focus.

Favouring what Deleuze (1996) calls 'messy vitality' over 'obvious unity of aesthetic reflex', the impact of 'Underground chic' rests on its incommensurability with a teleological History. Gulmoher Republic's curatorial logic emphasises discontinuity, the interstitial. It serves to destabilise the 'identity politics' rampant in the Indian Subcontinent since the European and North American economic crisis and the emergence of Asia as a new economical power established a new brand of jingoism in the region.

Recent exhibitions and the photographic Chobimela Biennial, held in Bangladesh, showcased numerous interesting works including contributions from master photographers like Raghu Rai, Salgado, Shahidul Alam, Anwar Hossain and others who are highly regarded by local viewers and artists. Gulmoher Republic's curatorial practice purposefully subverts these photographers and, in general, mainstream documentary photography's complicity with the representation of the systemic violence of poverty. The disaster-visibility dramatisation of social injustice and the NGO/Agency-formulated 'positive message' constructions, what Gulmoher Republic refers to as a 'poornographic' practice, only serve to perpetuate social injustice for the fun and profit of the Empire and its local agents. These theoretical issues are hardly defined, demarcated or dealt with in Bangladeshi contemporary arts with any kind of seriousness or rigour.

The Minister of Propaganda of Gulmoher Republic stressed that arts anchored in the unabashed depiction of Third World miserabilia or images of violence and

frisson are not at issue here. A post-conceptual perspective on violence could be invoked to examine how public narratives that circulate in our society are constructed, presented and represented in the media and eventually deployed in the general development of a macro-narrative. The minister is specifically interested in the relationship between the private experience of an event and the 'official' public story about it. This is to look into the entire cycle of any act or event, envisaged in a system where the critique of the linear continuity and dialectical polarity offers a revealing insight into the systematics, the registers and the vicious curvature of our political space. In particular, this regards the relationship between conceptual and visual aspects, the meaning of theoretical discourse, and the role of institutions and mediators.

2 Anonymous Artists' *The Citizens of the Womb* engages with and explores the valence of 'agency' by imposing a palimpsestic inscription on the 'truth' of the official version of the event of the Bisyajit killing, denouncing what Pierre Bourdieu (2012) refers to as a 'relation of force', and decolonising the deterministic and moralistic position of the journalists and the media commentators. By purging the moralistic order, the genuine symbolic violence of the social order can be staged beyond relations of force, themselves only elements of a shifting configuration in moral and political consciousnesses.

Rafiqul Shuvo, a young but very influential artist associated with Gulmoher Republic, views the process of 'our' art-making as something that is always morphing and stretching towards possibilities impossible to understand within the framework of Occidental art history and theory. Shuvo agrees with Gulmoher Republic's dictum that life/art can hardly be separated with a slash or a hyphen; for him, art is a live organism, symbiotically plugged into reality to rework its contour and content. Shuvo insists that recruiting the Russian art group Voina as the symbolic curators of the Berlin Biennial, the emergence of Julien Coupat or the 'Invisible committee' in France, hacker-artist group UX, fictional Elvis's language-speaking artists from the German and Swedish Pirate Parties, and so on, signals the shift in the roles of both artist and curators along the borders of art and so-called activism, and is of practical importance in saving Western art from the irrelevance of a market-driven doom.

Contra Post-structuralist Material

Only God Can Judge Me (2012), a recent exhibition orchestrated in an abandoned soap factory in the industrial district of Dhaka that Rafiqul Shuvo curated and participated in, mapped out a psycho-topology that differed from demarcating 'truth' as representative of an already existing reality. It heralded an oblique route to an emerging paradigm – still fluid and in-process, contingent on different socio-political variants – enabling the spectator to take in not only the exotic fauna, but also some of the topical/typical tensions and seismic turbulence of the new magmatic ground that is constantly shifting underfoot.

The curatorial logic of *Only God Can Judge Me* sought to grasp a corpus of work (a *tour d'horizon* predicated on 30 slivers of narratives) which does not fit too readily into the standard headings and ready-made ideological template/artemes. It drew on Shuvo's technical brilliance as a manipulator of what Duchamp referred to as the 'infra-ponce' and a curious rigorousness for the continual elaboration of the contest between Shuvo's vision and the languages of arts determined by circumstance and factors that conceptual artists in the years 1965–75 were the first to announce: the cultural dominance of information, the professionalisations of artistic practices, and the application of the criteria of good design.

The inclusion of photographers, pranksters, a poet, a rapper, the International Cricket Council's number one cricketing all-rounder in the world, an advertising guru from an international agency as well as a host of iconoclastic artists put into practice a body of beliefs concerning the art-making capabilities of persons as distant as can be imagined from the professional art world. This immediately initiates a tension between the context/form and the content as a semi-lattice of interconnections and overlaps of soon-to-vanish (his)stories and multiplicities of situations.

Shuvo's 'category-confusion' between art, craft, activism, power relations, hoax, culture hacking, culture production and journalism, and his elaborate layering of different temporal and syntactical planes, theatricality and obsessive level of technical control carry within them the seed of their own *delirium*. It immediately leads to upbraiding *orientalist* hermeneutics that confuse fascination with critique, voyeurism with empathy and profit with the exposing-of-social-wrongs. Invoking Susan Sontag (2003) – who traced the 'pulse of Christian iconography' in contemporary wartime photographs (she discussed Goya's aimed assaults on the sensibilities of the viewers in his *The Disasters of War* (1810–20) series, leading to a new standard in the responsiveness to suffering in the realm of art) – on how to respond to the pain of the *Other*, Shuvo's art-encounter takes on the form of a series of assaults.

Without irony, *Only God Can Judge Us* parenthesises contemporary viewers' jadedness, scepticism, numbness and morbid fascination with the contemporary arts, and reveals, from within, the space of proper circumstances in which to experience and process extreme material: form and context over content, since anything from child pornography to a Hijra (transvestite) saga could be potentially subversive or heroic, or more accurately, a transcendental signifier.

In the same register, Shuvo's delirious central pieces – *Golden Head*, an awe-inspiring installation by Shakhawat Hossain Razib; Marzia Farhana's installation *Iron Rain* and Mustafa Zaman's installation immediately come to mind – featuring insurgent subjects and freighted with surface tension that to a greater or a lesser degree foment reinterpretation in terms of the breakdown of control and classification, signal a possible aesthetic shift that challenges the current market demand for the exotic and the spectacularisation of trauma/catastrophe. A connection to a reality that demands subjective engagement and deep organic

language(s) that permit(s) a different kind of 'truth' in a delirious vein is here established.

Ronni Ahmmed is another artist closely associated with the cabinet of Gulmoher Republic. His recent installation, *Terrorism in Other Planets* (2012), part of an exhibition called *7 Senses* at the Dhaka Art Center, enunciated ideological imperatives of conscientious political imperatives in an anti-imperial project. It overrode the inner-colonialism in the head-space of 'native' artists while forwarding the hypothesis that art cannot be activated within a political vacuum; the *form* and the *language – the mode of production* – of image-making is deeply embedded and engaged with politics and particular strands of histories.

There is a massive impetus in South Asian art-making to, by and large, mine the form, ideological credentials and language of a neo-*orientalist* tradition. Once this *language* has been set in place and understood as the *only* protocol and methodology to invoke/depict Asian reality, it hardly matters to expose the abusive, *Corporate-Kapitalistic* subtext of arts or to celebrate one or two dissenters' work. The criteria and the guidelines by which to judge this mode of art production and control its critical consumption automatically stages the canonically relevant pictorial regime of *Empire*.

Unlike the majority of South Asian artists, Ronni Ahmmed creatively rethinks the coordinates of common reality and the politics which illuminates and connects these, while maintaining the tension of his vision and constantly deconstructing his practice within a broader tendency of re-narrating the present. In a letter reiterating his position on *Terrorism in Other Planets*, Ahmmed writes in his typical telegraphic fashion:

We are living in a political world where terrorism doesn't have a face. Terrorism HAS BECOME A COMMODITY ... It's an essential friend to the last phase of capitalism. WithOUT terrifying common people it's impossible to do good business. THE BUSINESS OF FEAR. There's a very thin line to separate state and the multinational conglomerates.

THEIR works process is similar. They are chickenhawk of war, hunger and poverty; they make profit out of war, hunger and poverty at every stage. THEY BELIEVE in DEVELOPMENT only because THEY SALE DEVELOPMENT. They kill people to show they can kill anyone anytime. THEY BELIEVE IN NATIONALISM only because THEY CAN SALE NATIONALISM. They believe in internationalism because they cannot rule the world individually. THEY BELIEVE IN TERRORISM because THEY need the war on terror to make business. Occident BELIEVES IN TERRORISM BUT THEY ARE NOT TERRORISTS. MUSLIMS DON'T BELIEVE IN TERRORISM BUT THEY've BECOME TERRORIST. Now capitalism needs its market to spread, to avoid decay. In few years there will be no market left for capitalism in this planet. It needs to colonise new planet for the speed of new capitalism. Occident

needs launch new capitalism in other planets like JUPITER ... URANUS ... PLUTO ... SATAN or MARS ... IT NEEDS TO HAVE NEW KIND OF TERRORISM AND FEAR TO CONTROL THE CITIZENS OF THESE NEW PLANETS. IN my work *Terrorism in other planets*, I wish to arrange a pre-launch meeting for the interplanetary new capitalism which is a direct byproduct of terrorism, fear and greed ... *Terrorism in other planets* is an attempt to understand the POST POST MODERN CANNIBALISM of the POST POST MODERN COLONIALISM. *Terrorism in other planets* is ALSO a seminar of real personalities FOR THE SAKE OF interplanetary peace. The seminar would be presided over by George BUSH, Steven Hawkings, Gandhi, Bin Laden, MURGI MILON (an infamous terrorist of Bangladesh), Harry Potter, James Bond, Sherlock Holmes, Rabindranath Tagore, Alexander the Great, Monica Bellucci, Alice, Gautam Buddha.⁴

Speculative Objects

In 1925, Walter Benjamin, in his first appraisal of surrealism, 'Dream Kitsch', analysed the accumulation of objects in his parents' overstuffed apartment in Berlin. He correctly proclaimed that surrealists do not perform the dream-dissection and anal-analysis of souls, but of the objects. The most analysable feature of contesting layers of contemporary time, he contended, is a mass-produced, commonplace, kitsch-object. The kitsch-object is: 'the last mark of banal, the one with which we clothe ourselves in dreams and in conversations, in order to take up into ourselves the power of the extinct object-world' (Benjamin 2001, 4).

The object-world is dead because its forms are fixed and frozen, although it is coded, freighted and invested with desire, power and, sometimes, rapidly and exceedingly mutable social meaning. In 'Dream Kitsch', Benjamin noted that what formerly was claimed as art 'begins at a distance of two meters from the body' (Benjamin 2001, 5), through mass-produced objects and an object-world shifted towards the individual subject, peeling away emotions, foregrounding fantasies, acting like mass-produced images or the montaged fragments, in that it met the viewer halfway. Mass-produced objects, kitsch and clutter demand their right to exist and to be decoded, for they have overridden the traditional relationship with objects, including art-objects. For the consumer, the mass-produced object 'offers itself to his groping touch and finally builds its figures inside him to form a being, who could be called der moblierte Mensch (an ornamented person or a tenant)' (Benjamin 2001, 4).

Objects inhabit us as we inhabit them. The object-world, the frozen world of things, besets us in a series of networks: the complex web of relationships, desires, past experiences, affections and so on which impact on raw perceptions and construct our reality. Our reality becomes a purely relational grid: one can

4 Private email conversation between Ahmmed and the author.

only think of reality as a network, a net cast over the entirety of objects, over the totality of the real. The consensual reality inscribes on the plane of the real this other plane which we call the plane of the symbolic.

Post-Structuralist linguistic theory is regularly deployed in order to assert that elements in consensual reality may be broken down and interpreted through a conceptual framework where the link between signifier and signified is arbitrary and controlled by politics. In Ronni's artwork, the pre-launch meeting for Capitalism on other planets, the speakers George Bush or Gandhi or Monica Bellucci are replaced by objects: a chair, name tag and a vegetable. The relationship of the person of George Bush, and the word conveying George Bushness, to a receiver is absolutely arbitrary: it is controlled by the hegemonic politics of the Kapital.

Objects are not subjects, but subjects can be objectified, can be transformed into words, into signifiers. Signifiers stand forever, and mysteriously, beyond the subject or the metaphysics of the essence of the subjects and objects. In seeking to explain the relationship between objects and words, we are constantly brought up against the limits of our knowledge of reality.

Terrorism in Other Planets

The term 'concept art' was arguably first used by Henry Flint, a writer and musician loosely associated with the Fluxus movement. In 1961 he postulated a kind of art which consists of a 'concept'. In 1968, Sol LeWitt famously stated: 'the idea is the machine that makes the art'. The conceptual artist mimics an absurd producer who, in the heyday of the late 1960s and early 1970s, interrogated new capitalist relationships, the fetish of information, communication technology and the desubjectification of production. Of course, the ground-breaking exhibitions like *Op Losse Schroeven* and *When Attitudes Become Forms* led to widespread protest, the cancellation of a planned Joseph Beuys exhibition and Harald Szeemann's resignation from the directorship of the Kunsthalle. It not only culminated in the larger contours of the Arte Povera, Anti-Form, Conceptual and Land Art of the moment, but inaugurated an innovative approach of de-emphasising the material presentation, challenging existing and future categories and introducing new curatorial strategies.

While *Terrorism in Other Planets* is, theoretically, a paradoxical project which attempts to capitalise on conceptual art's formative tenets, the artist Ronni Ahmmed profits from his own geographic and cultural specificities. This requires him to concentrate his inquiries on a particular terrain: the psychogeographic, spiritual and political Bangladesh *vis-à-vis* the war on terror. A pattern of hegemonic imperialist cultural reality and a historical experience of resistance against Empire inform *Terrorism in Other Planets*. In this manner, it is not just derivative or a residual Fluxus art, but an attempt to subvert the causal fetters of consensual reality, as proactive and insurgent subjects of history in a perpetual state of siege.

While the setting of the seminar room and the designation of the speakers and their place in the global capitalist hierarchy provide an underlying premise, pivoted on the continual interplay of a split between reason and its Other, the immanent terrain of Ahmmed's sculptures made with kitchen utensils, brooms, silverware and chess pieces glued on a chequered soccer ball, inaugurate processes of signification that can be constituted into a ready-made semiology. These sculptures solicit their objects in double-bind discursive regularities: in experience by finding the form which orders experience and by raising the lived horizon of our knowledge to the level of our discourse.

There is something that has not yet been made explicit in the above discussion of Gulmoher Republic and its sovereign citizenry network's creative construction/documentation of the upheaval in the perception of social space – their defiant charting of the disappearance of the city as a critique of the spectacle and economics of late capitalism.

In his critique of late capitalism, a revolutionary French icon of 1968, Guy Debord, declared that the spectacle, being the reigning social organisation of a paralysed history, is in effect a false consciousness of time. Meanwhile, Fredric Jameson pronounced that modernism is dominated by the categories of space rather than time. A new technological space-time, operating within a constructed social fabric, composed/decomposed by the transfer, transit, transmission systems and transport of transmigration networks, displaces the city in historical time and signals the unprecedented violence of a permanent wartime economism. The human body residing in the modern city produces value, consumes spectacle, and is conditioned by laws that are not ethical, but economical.

The Critical Art Ensemble describes the modern city as one of 'liquescence', where the location of power – and the sites of resistance – rests in ambiguous zones without borders that are dissolved in the name of multinational greed. In its later exhibitions, Gulmoher Republic captures the vector of the citizen of these interrupted and nomadic cities and their hellish intestine of historical and post-historical architectures in various forms of (de)composition, evolution and (dis)use. It links the perimeter of a 'biographical universe' to an aesthetic vocabulary that attempts to revise the historically specific nature of the cinematic reportage of place/space within the social field.

Gulmoher Republic's use of Naeem Mohaiemen's *Live Through Life or Die Trying* – the photo-text combination that stages the intersection and interstices of a radical Islamist and a leftist rally taking place on the same day – could be received as a photo-alchemical practice in which the artist's conscience is mortgaged to form and demands abstraction to perform an emotional need to understand and resist a dromologically mutated space-time. This initiates an arbitrary arena of symbolic form which embodies a magical logic defying the violent regimes of disciplines and economic imperatives of various stages of capitalism – directed at the body from without – encoded and perpetuated through architecture and forms. Space is being scrutinised and qualified by the Other's gaze, which, surprisingly, is not 'historical' or 'politicised'.

Epilogue

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin proclaims:

Anecdote brings things closer to us in space, and allows them to enter into our lives. Anecdote represents the extreme opposite of history – which demands an 'empathy' that renders everything abstract. Empathy amounts to the same thing as reading newspapers. The true method of making things present is: to imagine them in our space (and not to imagine ourselves in their space). (Benjamin 1999, 1,014)

Gulmoher Republic discontinues the telos determined in advance by the macro-narrative of history to attempt to juxtapose an anecdotal and dialogical scenario, collapsing the alignment and separation between three contested, but nevertheless entwined, palimpsest-sites of 'arthistorylife'.

Through various performative projects, publications and constant questioning and debates, Gulmoher Republic seeks to launch, in Žižek's parlance, an effective critical procedure to trip the wires of the contesting strata of realities, stories, fragments that do not usually touch – in other words, to interrogate dominant power relations through the critical lens of artists who are constantly and ineluctably marginalised and disavowed. Gulmoher Republic brings together the insights of a revisionist history concerning the constructedness and discursivity of a Bengali identity with the argument that this identity's organisation is implicit in the negotiation of the violence of Western development and modernism.

Contra 'history' and by opposing history's cumulative and progressive mega-narrative, the networked, radically open-sourced and connected Gulmoher Republic proposes to let the Other inhabit our space and open the narrative up to a heterogeneous reconstruction. This is not a monolithic power-endorsed past, but a fluid and polyphonic present: the fabulous and hysterical history of now!

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