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Asian art on display: Questions of representation in the ethnographic turn

Taking the theoretical clues from Hal Foster and Miwon Kwon, the text discusses theoretical aspects of the relationship between art and society in the so-called "ethnographic turn". The discussion is related to examples of art projects mentioned by other contributions in this issue, and concludes with a call for critical reflections on part of Western museums in their attempt to "represent" art from Asian countries. Note: Japanese and Chinese names in this article are written in the order surname – first name

By Gunhild Borggreen

One of the recurring themes on the Visualising Asian Modernity seminars was the issue of display and representation of art from Asian countries in Denmark and other places outside Asia. Indeed, this topic was one of the main reasons for organising the event in the first place. An increasing number of museums, galleries and exhibition venues in the West have art shows focusing on traditional as well as contemporary art from one or several nations in Asia. In many cases, the curators of the exhibition have organised the show on basis of a certain "nationalist" approach to the art works, that is, an approach which communicates a kind of national narrative to the audiences as a framework for the entire exhibition. This often leads to the more or less explicit notion that the art works represent some wider anthropological perspectives of the particular nation in question. In other words, art is seen as a representation of broader cultural significances, and particular traits of a nation or a population are deduced from a relatively small sample of art works.

This correlation between art and anthropology is not new in regards to display of Asian art in Western context. In the case of Japan, for example, the sixteenth century Portuguese Jesuit missionary João Rodrigues made a sweeping connection between visual art forms and the mental disposition of the Japanese people: "In keeping with their melancholy temperament they are usually inclined towards lonely and poignant pictures, such as those portraying the four seasons of the year" (*This Island of Japan* 1973: 303). Twentieth century American anthropologist Ruth Benedict used the metaphors of flower arrangements to describe the cultural patterns restraining the Japanese people in regards to their individual freedom: "So, too, chrysanthemums are grown in pots and arranged for the annual flower

shows all over Japan with each perfect petal separately disposed by the grower's hand and often held in place by a tiny invisible wire rack inserted in the living flower" (Benedict 1989: 295). Many of the first exhibitions of Japanese art in Europe took place in the context of World Expositions, where arts, crafts, and other types of products from various countries around the world were (and still are) presented in "national pavilions". National pavilions are also fundamental to one of the most prestigious displays of visual art, namely the International Art Biennale in Venice, where Japan has had a permanent national pavilion since 1956. What distinguishes the current trend, however, is the recent so-called "ethnographic turn" in contemporary art, in which artists deal with social and cultural issues in their art works and hereby explore areas of interest usually reserved for the ethnographer. Thus, the art works themselves invite a correspondence between the aesthetic and the social. This makes it tempting for a museum curator to let the artists themselves stand for or represent the identity of the nation or culture they address. What may have originally intended to be an art exhibition, then slides into an anthropological discourse.

The dilemma of representation is not limited to curators at art museums and galleries, but is infused on many levels of the cultural exchange on stake, ranging from expectations of the audience, discourses provided by the media, analyses by critics and academics, as well as the action and interaction of the artist. Indeed, while the Visualising Asian Modernity seminars were conceived as a platform for discussing exactly these issues of connections between art and society, the participants themselves were caught up in a tangle of representation: from which position do we speak, what agenda is explicated, and how do we define the authority with



which we present and interpret various aspects of Asian visual culture? The seminar participants and audiences themselves represented a variety of positions, from gallery owners to university academics, from artists to art critics, from undergraduate students to distinguished professors, from event managers to ambassadors, from general audience to professional experts. Does a Danish research student, who spends six months in Beijing to analyse the art marked, “know” more or less about Chinese contemporary art than a native Chinese artist on an Artist-in-Residence Programme in Denmark? Is a graduate student in Art History in better position to analyse the intricate dynamics of Confucian influenced relations of family structures in Korean society than a scholar of religious studies because the issue is addressed through the art work of a Korean female artist? Are we all to become “experts” in our own rights when we enter an art installation that asks us to imagine what it is like to be a queen? The correlation of art and anthropology somehow highlights issues of authenticity and “truth” in an unexpected manner – while knowledge of other cultures is generally expected to be based on field study and close encounters with the particular culture, art is often assumed to be something that communicates on a universal and individual level, and something everyone can have an opinion about. Approach to the exhibition relies entirely on which perspective has the upper hand – the ethnographic or the aesthetic – and the levels of authenticity in each perspective will support each other with quite different effect.

The Artist as Ethnographer

The issue of authenticity and reflexivity is crucial for the emergence of the Ethnographic Turn in contemporary art. In the chapter entitled “The Artist as Ethnographer” in his book *The Return of the Real* (1996), art theorist Hal Foster unfolds the complex interaction of anthropology and art. Foster argues that the traditional field of anthropology, with its attention on entire cultures as “collective artists”, or attempts to detect general patterns of behaviour through cultural production, is being challenged by new modes of identity and reflexivity. Related to the mapping of the Primitive Other in the nineteenth century, European imaginary of the world had been based on the narratives of civilisations developing over time and ordered in a hierarchy, leading to the general notion that the further away from the Western “inside” a particular culture was, the more primitive and undeveloped it must be. According to

Foster, “the primitive is first projected by the Western white subject as a primal stage in *cultural* history and then reabsorbed as a primal stage in *individual* history”, giving way to topics of self-othering as primitivist fantasy in psychological terms (Foster 1996: 178).

In a self-critical search for formal reflexivity, a new version of anthropology developed into an “artist envy” among anthropologists in the 1980s because the artist was seen as a “self-aware reader of *culture understood as text*” (Foster 1996: 180). Foster identifies a similar but reciprocal “ethnographer envy” among artists, who aspire to use fieldwork as a meeting place for theory and practice. Foster identifies five main characteristics for the artist’s (and art critic’s) keen interest in anthropology and the reasons why it possesses vanguard status: firstly, anthropology is prized as the science of alterity (otherness), and secondly, it takes culture as its object. Thirdly, anthropology is considered contextual and, fourthly, anthropology is praised for its interdisciplinary approach. As a fifth aspect Foster states that “the recent *self-critique* of anthropology renders it attractive, for it promises a reflexivity of the ethnographer at the center even as it preserves a romanticism of the other in the margins” (Foster 1996: 182).

Art critic Miwon Kwon identifies similar trajectories concerning self-reflexivity in critical art projects from the 1980s and 1990s, where “politics of representation” became prominent. According to Kwon, ethnography became a methodological approach for artists because the traditional ethnography based on participant observation promises a dialectical position of both experience and interpretation. These days, however, ethnography may also present a problematic shift because the artist-as-ethnographer oscillates between a role of the empathetic and engaged participant on the one hand, and the observer, who interprets the event and assesses meaning and significance of the broader context, on the other (Kwon 2000: 75). Kwon reflects on how the aspect of experience somehow has become dominant in a variety of cultural arenas where “personal experience” is centred, especially in popular media, as a way of consolidating such types of knowledge about culture. Through her analyses of two artists applying ethnographic methods, Kwon points out how both artists display a mistrust in interpretation altogether in favour of experience. Kwon does not simply ask for more “interpretation”, but rather more mutual interrelation between the two positions, and she emphasizes “recognition of the *relational* dynamics between experience



and interpretation, between participation and observation" (Kwon 2000: 87). Kwon concludes that the ethnographic paradigm in art and art criticism is still relevant and central, although the paradigm is reconfigured along an experience/interpretation axis in which the two modes threaten to either collide or dissolve, pulling in each direction rather than negotiating and reflecting each other.

Social issues at VAM

One of the main issues for the Visualising Asian Modernity seminars has been that contemporary art reflects the dynamics of social change in an age of globalisation. Many of the presentations at the seminars revolved around an ethnographic perspective, and included interpretive dimensions by the fact that the art works are mediated through art critics and art historians. The seminars did not really answer Miwon Kwon's call for a relational dynamics between experience and interpretation, but perhaps in fact doubled the tension because art critics and academics also observe, experience and interpret art works in social context. Nevertheless, at the root of many art projects, we are able to see the merger of artistic and anthropologist viewpoints because the artist functions as anthropologist in his or her own society, and thereby unfolds a double role by being a member of the community as well as an outside observer. This seems to be particularly significant for artists who have moved away from their place of origin to pursue an artistic career as international or transnational artist. While the aesthetic dimension is clearly up front in most of the art works discussed at the seminars and in this volume, the experience of being part of the particular community or society provides a focus point for a site-specific content. The artist applies a detached viewpoint, namely a critical distance inherent in contemporary art and art criticism in order to make visible aspects of social concern.

We can see traits of social concern in the art works by some of the artists described in this volume, as well as the art projects presented at the Visualising Asian Modernity seminars. The contribution by Yoshitaka Mōri at the seminars and in this volume addresses the issue of social and political concerns in art works head on in his text on the art in the age of *freeter* work force in contemporary Japan. The term *freeter* is a concept coined in the late 1980s. In the beginning the word *freeter* was associated with a free and independent spirit among young people, who after graduating from universities

sought part-time and free lance jobs in new and often creative industries. Later, the term *freeter* became connected with social problems because cheap and flexible part-time jobs no longer are just an option, but a condition, and may be forced to this lifestyle for decades. Because of the economic crisis since 2008, which greatly affected the art market, many visual artists in Japan have become part of the labour force, often as *freeter*. Mōri provides refers to art projects that have elements of political protest and direct implications on social dimensions of the Japanese society, as for example the artistic political project 246 Artist Meeting, where a group of artists organised art projects in collaboration with homeless people under a bridge near JR Shibuya station in Tokyo. Mōri notes that the project "is an interesting example of the freeter generation showing their solidarity with old homeless people. It is not merely a supporting project but also a project in which young artists and old homeless people shared their anger with the current situation and anxiety for the future." Mōri concludes that the 246 Artist Meeting is one of the best examples of political movements within the art environment in the 2000s.

Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg provides another example in her analysis of Cai Guoqiang's art projects and the reception of them in China as well as in the West. Wedell-Wedellsborg points out how Cai staged a "cultural readymade" by re-enacting the creation, display and decay of life-size clay figures in his work *Venice Rent Collection Courtyard* from 1999. Cai's work was a "cultural readymade" because it replicated a 1965 iconic sculpture from the social realist genre in China that ordinarily spell out a narrative of suffering tenants being exploited by a despotic landlord. Another reference to social issues may be seen in Cai's work *Head On* (2006), in which Wedell-Wedellsborg argues that "the installation immediately suggests the disaster of group mentality and lack of individual reflection." While the work includes a number of specific cultural references to Chinese history and contemporary literature, Wedell-Wedellsborg refers to the artist's own characteristic of the work as "a symbol of universal human tragedy", when the pack of wolves in Cai's installation crash into a glass wall and collapse is seen as signifying human behaviour in broader terms.

Minna Valjakka provides an account of performance art related to the specific site of Tian'anmen Square in Beijing, pointing out the historical and cultural significance of successive portraits of Chairman Mao. Valjakka describes four particular performance art works



that included an intervention of some kind with the public space of Tian'anmen Square, and reveals the various modes of political constraints and social behaviour on this symbolic site in Beijing. For example, Valjakka points out issues concerning social values connected to the increasing differences between rural and urban lifestyle and population addressed in Han Bing's work *Walking the Cabbage* (2000). The performance entitled *Gun* (2003 and ongoing) by the female artist Ma Yanling stages a fake attempt at suicide at various public places, including Tian'anmen Square. Holding a gun to her own head, the artist explores the way in which people react to such a situation, and how the idea of the "impossible" may generate social interaction. While the artist herself emphasizes that the performance is not a political statement, Valjakka nevertheless reads the art project as addressing the issue of how women can "become visible agents of the active public space – the space usually controlled by male."

Gender perspectives as both aesthetic and social concern appears in the essay by Krestina Skirl in this volume. In her analyses of the *Elevator Girls* series by the Japanese contemporary artist Yanagi Miwa, Skirl points towards the re-enactment of gender stereotypes in a particular capitalist setting of contemporary Japanese consumer culture. According to Skirl, these art works are about the ideals of appearance that seem to dominate in most societies through media and advertisement. Skirl understands Yanagi's works as both a visualisation and an appropriation of the glamour and iconography in fashion photography, and suggests how such images represent an "anonymous uniformity resulting from women trying to conform to this image". By the use of Judith Butler's theory on gender performance, Skirl argues that the formation of identity is always a two-way performative action because the existing norms for masculinity and femininity are not fixed categories but are to some degree "dynamic entities that are socially and discursively "constructed"."

Reiko Tomii provides a detailed analysis of the Japanese contemporary artist Akasegawa Genpei and his many art projects that overlap and converge into social platforms. Tomii argues for Akasegawa's oeuvre as an "ultimate avant-garde achievement" by the ways in which the artist, through countless art projects and activities since the late 1950's, have managed to dissolve the borders between "art" and "life". Akasegawa has brought "art" into a range of non-art environments, such as the street cleaning project during the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 as a comment to the government's

beautification campaign, or the courtrooms of Tokyo Regional Court when Akasegawa was to defend his photomechanical replica of a 1000-yen note as "art" (and not counterfeit). In the *Ultra-Art Tomason* project from the early 1980s, appropriation of seemingly "useless" objects or "properties" became part of a process that mobilizes people into collective endeavours and gain consciousness about everyday surroundings. Tomii sums up the life long activities of Akasegawa by noting that the essence of Akasegawa's populism "empowers our grassroots instinct partaking the ideal for democratic culture."

Site specificity

Issues of activism and democracy were addressed in my presentation at the Visualising Asian Modernity seminar. I focused on the contemporary Japanese artist Yanobe Kenji and his art projects involving the former site of Expo 70 in Osaka, the first international world exposition to be held outside the Western world in 1970. In his artistic catch phrase "ruins of the future" Yanobe draws references to the political activism and anti-Vietnam protest of the 1960s, while at the same time establishing a link to the current geopolitical situation in the so-called "war on terror". Yanobe carries out ethnographic methods by locating and interviewing artists and activists that were involved in activism back in the 1960s. As I have argued elsewhere (Borggreen 2010), when Yanobe re-enacts one of the iconic activist events from 1970 that involves self-reflection as artist, he also faces his own physical vulnerability. It is possible to understand Yanobe Kenji's art projects as dealing with broader issues of nationhood, geopolitics and warfare. However, Yanobe's ethnographic stance embodied through experimental performance at a specific site loaded with cultural memory may be seen as an attempt to establish a relational dynamics between interpretation and experience that Miwon Kwon suggests as a way forward (Kwon 2000: 87).

Yanobe Kenji is not the only artist in the Osaka area who produces art works or performances that are related to site-specific local context and history. The perspective of the engaged "artist as ethnographer" can be found in for example the artist Date Nobuaki, who collaborates with citizens or institutions in local communities to create ukuleles out of material from demolished or destroyed buildings. Another example is Kimura Toshio Jinjin, who intervenes in and negotiates the use of public space of the Shinsekai area in Osaka



with his open-air tea ceremonies set up in a shopping arcade or a parking lot. Bypassers are invited to participate by decorating their own teacup, and to drink tea together with the artist and other community members. These and other similar art projects combine aesthetics and activism, culture and politics, in a way that not only refers to the close interaction between art and political activism in public space in the 1960s', but also provides new dimensions that relate specifically to current issues of social concern such as urban planning and community ownership. The participatory aspect seems to dissolve the challenge of interpretation because the experience of being part (of building a ukulele, of participating in a tea ceremony) becomes in a sense a *presentation* rather than a *representation*.

However, it is most unlikely that community-based art projects such as Date's and Kimura's mentioned above will ever be shown outside Japan, or even outside Osaka. The projects are simply too closely connected to a specific site with a unique historical and cultural context. Curators, who want to present these types of works to art audiences in other countries, need to know the particular background, and they need to convince museums, sponsors and audiences that such works are relevant for broader audiences outside Osaka area. This, I think, rarely happens. The challenge involved to transmit the specificity of the site, the ethnographic dimensions as well as the participatory aspect is too complex. Instead the artists chosen for display outside their local context are those whose art works offer interpretations that fit into broader and often stereotypical images of the particular nation or culture.

For example, works by Yanobe Kenji have been shown in Denmark on two occasions, both at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, namely in the exhibition *Japan Today* in 1995, and the exhibition *Manga! Images from Japan* shown in 2008. In both instances Yanobe's art was a part of group exhibitions framed by the concept of Japan, emphasising the commonality of the artists on display as being from the same country, rather than a distinct choice of aesthetics or a specific subject matter. In both Louisiana exhibitions, the works of Yanobe Kenji were presented as related to manga and otaku life style. This has somehow come to underline a stereotype regarding the image of Japan in Denmark and other places, namely that manga is such a dominant part of Japanese everyday life that even fine art is heavily influenced by it. Such notions are of course confirmed by some art projects from Japan, for example in the internationally visible art and curatorship of Neo Pop artist

Murakami Takashi, whose rise to success is analysed by Adrian Favell in this volume. In these cases, art has come to represent an idea of a certain "Japaneseness" promoted through soft power export of popular culture. In similar fashion, as Wedell-Wedellsborg suggests, works by Chinese artists such as Cai Guoqiang are received with a "fascination with the exotic, with Chineseness, often combined with a search for political statements." What is contained in the "Japaneseness" or "Chineseness" may change over time, but the notion of exoticness related to distance, as indicated in the primitivist perspective suggested by Hal Foster and others, seem to prevail. Because of the audiences' assumed "unfamiliarity" with Japanese or Chinese society, curators and exhibition organisers apparently feel they need to "explain" the broader perspective. To propose an example of contrast: I cannot imagine that French artist Sophie Calle would ever be seen as representing some kind of overall "Frenchness" in a Danish museum, even though Calle's art projects, with her ethnographic approach, may tell us something about people in France.

Critique of Ethno-Aesthetics

The construction of national or ethnic frameworks of "Japaneseness" or "Chineseness" in relation to art exhibitions is not limited to displays of Asian art. The idea of ethnicity being connected to particular forms or style of art is what Greenlandic artist Pia Arke has termed "ethno-aesthetics". Ethno-aesthetics imply that certain types of aesthetics are seen, not as products of cultural activities or exchange, but as emerging from an essential and inherent sense of artistic creation related to the ethnicity of that particular people. In Arke's discussion, the concept is related to primitivism and the idea that something "original" and "authentic" is preserved in the art works of Eskimo artists. The aesthetic is related to anthropology because indigenous people are often assumed to be more in direct contact with a kind of creative spirit, and that indigenous art is best (i.e. most "authentic") when it is not made to mime the styles of Western modernism. Arke paraphrases this notion: "The cult of the ethnic is a cult of human authenticity, of the original nobility of man, of the primitive in the sense of the inspired" (Arke 2010: 16) Even though such viewpoints flourished more profoundly in the early twentieth century, Arke points out that the conception is still strong among Western art historians, curators and critics. Young contemporary artists from Greenland, as Pia Arke herself, find themselves in a post-colonialist dilemma: "[...] we can choose between being true



Greenlanders and being true artists, and we are given to understand that, actually, the first alternative is the only right choice" (Arke 2010: 18).

By the same token, in many exhibitions of art works by artists from Asia, the "primitive" references may these days have been replaced by notions of technology, popular culture, or other contemporary elements, but the idea that art works as objects represent an entire culture in an anthropological understanding remains. Somehow, this mechanism is perhaps even more profound in relation with those art works that engage in social concerns and ethnographic perspectives, as with the artists discussed above. As Hal Foster identifies, the artist often becomes the representational figure rather than the investigator: "[...] as the artist stands *in* the identity of a sited community, he or she may be asked to stand *for* this identity, to represent it institutionally. In this case the artist is primitivized, indeed anthropologized, in turn: here is your community, the institution says in effect, embodied in your artist, now on display" (Foster 1996: 178). Not surprisingly, in a Danish or other Western context, this anthropologized framing of the artist is doubled when the artist-as-ethnographer investigates aspects within a culture which is always already constructed as Other.

International art museums today, at least in Denmark, are being forced by economic conditions and the general commoditisation of the art world to make blockbuster exhibitions that can draw a lot of audiences. Curators may feel pressured to choose art works that have recognizable elements, or artists who are already well established on the international art scene. Curators rarely have time or economic means to pursue a thorough research into territories of contemporary art that are new and unknown to them. Museums focus instead on artistic themes that are cool and current, such as manga and popular culture from Japan, or visual paraphrases of Mao as political art from China. Instead of trying to highlight the complexity of the art works, the goal for museums seems to be to find the lowest common denominator that audiences easily can relate to and feel secure about in their recognition. As Miwon Kwon suggests in an essay on site specificity, art institutions are now interested in artistic practices that mobilize the site as a "discursive narrative" and lend themselves to the museum's self-promotional apparatus. Many art projects have become "nomadic" because they can travel all over the world; the works are moved out of the context and become, in a sense, universal (Kwon 1997).

The complexity of the art works is lost in this translation process, and the universal becomes trivial. What is needed is the abandoning of the national framework for art exhibitions: no more *Japan Today* or *Made in China*, but instead exhibitions that focus on themes addressed by artists across or beyond national boundaries. In such cases, art works by Yanobe Kenji or Cai Guoqiang will no longer be seen as representing something "Japanese" or "Chinese" because of the origin of the artist, but rather as presenting an ethnographic inquiry into a particular issue with a specific site and cultural context. Even complex relational art projects can only reveal fragments of the entire picture. In this view, museums should commit themselves to eliminate the romanticism of the Other, and denounce any kind of anthropological "truth" when they choose to display Asian art.

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