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conversation about art

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Geocentric Conundrums: Aesthetics and Ethics in Contemporary Art

Gemma Lloyd interviews
Anthony Downey

GEMMA LLOYD: **As a member of the editorial board for *Third Text* you have played an important role in generating discourse and providing a platform for thinking beyond the Eurocentric tendencies of art and visual culture. Subsequently *Third Text* has expanded its remit to include *Third Text Africa*, *Third Text Asia* and *Tercer Texto*; the sister journal of *Third Text*. Where else or how else would you like to see *Third Text* go from here?**

ANTHONY DOWNEY: *Third Text* has indeed contributed much by way of debate and discussion about so-called non-western art. It has done so under the stewardship of our founding editor Rasheed Araeen and the contributions of many others so I feel a bit uneasy – given the collective underpinnings of *Third Text* – stating where I would personally like to see the journal go from here. However, it is obvious that the effects of globalisation are determining not only new avenues of thought but also – as reflected in the development of *Third Text Africa*, *Third Text Asia* and *Tercer Texto* – a more localised demand for texts written in a language other than English. *Third Text* has always been conscious of publishing texts and essays that would perhaps not find a voice elsewhere so I would expect us to continue exploring the less well-trodden routes of debate and discussion.

I would also add that, having celebrated the 100th edition of *Third Text* in 2010 with an extended 'special' issue, the very terms that continue to define debate in contemporary art practices – the political, the aesthetic, community, cosmopolitanism, ethics, technology, autonomy, eco-aesthetics, sustainability, radicality, process, collaboration, civic society, history, and the notion of a centre and margin – are all being redefined in relation to one another and our present post-colonial, neoliberal milieu, not to mention the realpolitik of our post-September 11th world.

I would therefore expect *Third Text* to continue to play a pivotal role in the redefining of these terms and how they affect if not prescribe our understanding of contemporary visual culture.

GL: **Among your research interests you include 'the potential for an ethics of contemporary art practices'; what prompted you to initially immerse yourself in this line of research?**

AD: One of the key areas of examination in postcolonial studies in the late 80s and early 90s (that is, when I was an undergraduate) were terms such as difference, otherness, alterity and subalternity. I found, at the time, that work by philosophers such as Jacques Derrida (specifically his engagement with the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas) lent a degree of ethical purchase to what were often very theory-laden discussions. The extent to which colonial and western-centric discourse tended towards forms of conceptual totalisation – the homogenisation of a region, for example – and binary processes of thought – us (superior) versus them (inferior) – seemed to me to be not only deconstructed but thoroughly disavowed by writers such as Derrida and Levinas, and others such as Homi Bhabha and Robert JC Young. The ethical, as a form of engagement with others and how we approach writing and the criticism of visual culture, seemed both relevant and necessary in the context of both these writer's and much of what was then considered postcolonial theory.

I personally think ethics still has a part to play in criticism but the parameters have changed and the very meaning of the term has changed too. Firstly, postcolonial theory, in its emphasis upon otherness and difference, seems less and less able to think beyond these tropes without engaging in forms of relativism. The various debates about whether or not multiculturalism is an effective framework for thinking through issues today, or whether the term has been instrumentalised by political forces to give the impression of inclusion and access, has produced a so-called 'ethics' that is often a barely disguised mode of normative response that merely pays lip service to notions such as difference, alterity, or the other in the name of ethical criticism and theory.

So, for me, ethics still has a role to play but it is a very different one to what it was initially deployed to do – that is, relativise and reconfigure any easy notion of self and other, us and them, the west and the rest. But the role and exact meaning of ethics as it is practiced needs to be prefigured in actual as opposed to virtual or universal concepts. Ethics, I would suggest, needs to be situated. Alain Badiou's philosophy, for example, is not deductive nor rooted in an a priori sense of ethicality or otherness, nor does it advocate any easy forms of the moral communalism we see progressed by the rhetoric of multiculturalism. Ethics, for Badiou, is unknowable without appeal to a specific event-based experience. To paraphrase his work, there is no ethics in general but only an ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation. And it is this form of what I would term *situated ethics* that continues to interest me in relation to contemporary visual culture and art as a practice, nowhere more so than when we consider the emergence of collaborative or participative-based practices that co-opt communities and the political rhetoric of access and inclusion.

GL: **This year Manifesta 8 proposed to create a dialogue between a region in one country (Murcia) and the region of a continent (North Africa); the artist Thierry Geoffroy/Colonel, whose project is included in San Antón Prison, Cartagena delivers a direct provocation in response to the curatorial theme. Geoffroy/Colonel invites North African artists to exhibit their work in his allocated space through what he calls 'penetrations'. Power relations are clearly at play here, and exaggerated in the accompanying videos which were broadcast as ten 10-minute episodes for Spanish television and show the artist in full colonial get-up (including the colonial pith helmet) conducting interviews with people on the streets of Cartagena in an attempt to establish whether or not there is a dialogue between the two regions. What are your thoughts about this project in particular in relation to the ethics of collaboration and as a response to the curatorial precedent of Manifesta 8?**

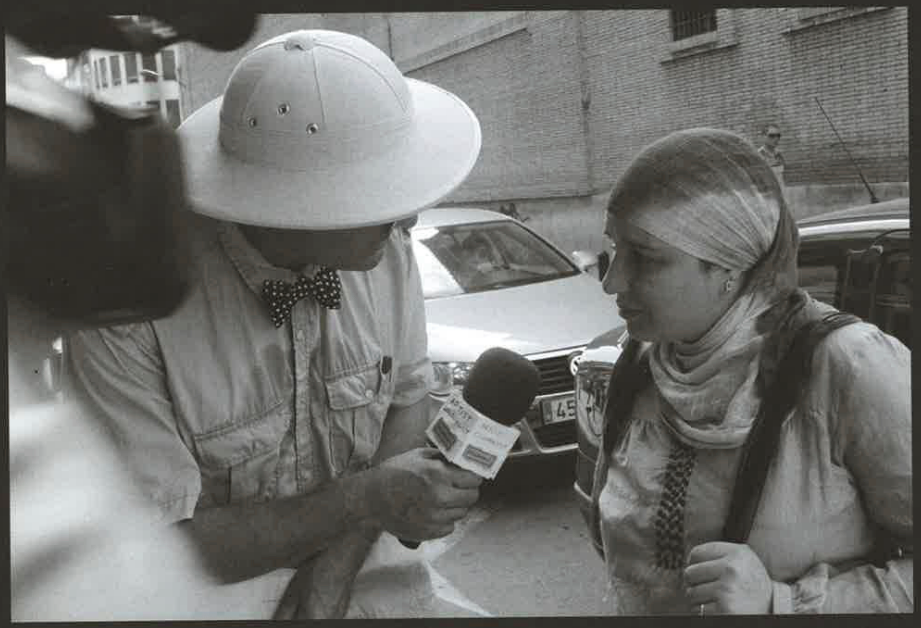
AD: I have yet to see this show and, although I have heard reactions to it, do not feel wholly qualified to comment. It sounded as if the stated curatorial intentions, which were very interesting, were not wholly realised through the selection process. I am not sure of the reasons for this, so will leave it at that.

GL: **In recent years in London, there seems to have been an influx of geocentrically themed exhibitions, perhaps one of the main protagonists/culprits is the Saatchi Gallery, who supported the YBA movement in Britain, and seems to again desire the power to 'represent' both nations and continents via neatly 'packaged' exhibitions of contemporary art from the USA, the Middle East, China, India and Britain respectively. What would you consider to be a positive antidote to such geocentrically produced exhibitions?**

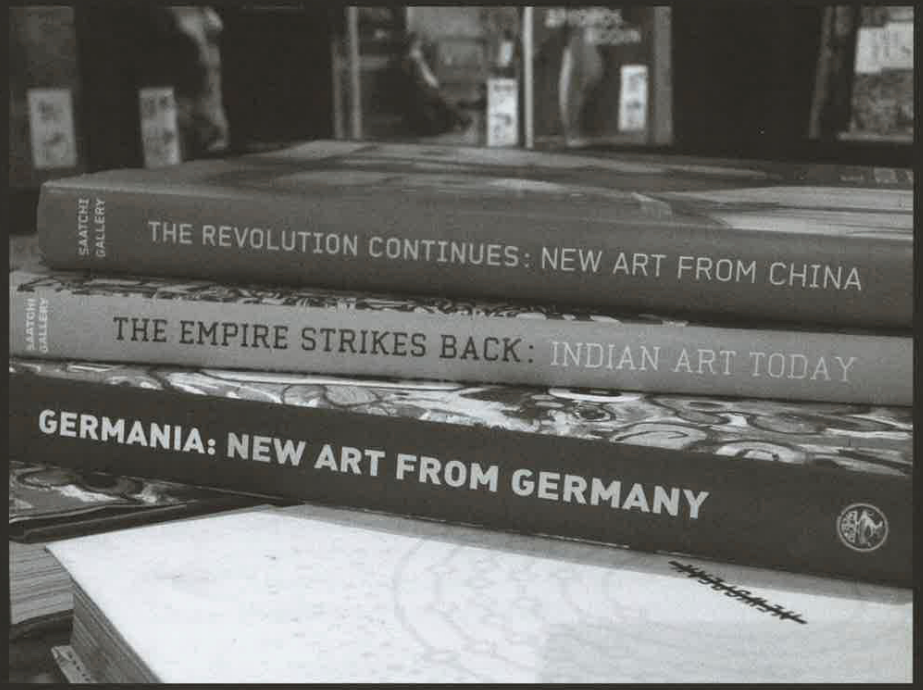
AD: This question is a perennial one and not easily answerable. The 'packaging' of art as a practice is an old if not particularly venerable activity. The profit to be had between an advertising mogul's vaguely defined interests and a peer group of artists who were taught how to make effective and desirable 'products' was indeed timely. The excess that resulted was both mirroring and goading the excess we saw in our financial markets throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The appearance of so-called emerging markets – we should pause here and ask: emergent in relation to what exactly – and the need in a credit-fuelled society to fill various institutions and over-mortgaged houses again produced a serendipitous moment in the trading of art.

Interestingly, the emerging markets seen in the west coincided with a political need on behalf of, for example, China and India to market themselves worldwide in cultural guises more familiar to an often wary west. It is arguable that we have seen a similar attempt by *inter alia* the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to market themselves through culture – although it should be noted that, unlike China and India, the latter grouping have done so not so much through the indigenous growth of artist's movements as they have through the development – some say 'parachuting' in – of institutions such as the Louvre and the Guggenheim to oversee cultural development. As to promoting alternatives to these 'packaged' shows, there are of course many, but we will always have shows such as this as long as we have the confluence of monied interests and the narrow interests of both politically-motivated and PR-inclined decision-making processes.

GL: **Would you agree that with the growth of the EU and the tendency to become a homogeneous whole, there is an increased desire to identify and**



Thierry Geoffroy/Colonel *ARTIST COLONIALIST INVESTIGATIONS FOR XV: Is there a dialogue with the Spanish and your Northern African? Photo: Rom Lorenzo*



Catalogues to accompany the exhibitions 'The Revolution Continues: New Art from China', 'The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today' and 'Germania: New Art from Germany', all held at the Saatchi Gallery, London. Photo: Gemma Lloyd

extract the 'differences' between nations when showing work from these countries?

AD: I am not so sure about this. I have not seen many shows recently of, say, Spanish art or Irish or German for that matter.

GL: **Whereas most exhibitions are approached with a degree of understanding that what is being presented is a subjective take on a given theme – a 'right' the curator exercises – there are clearly significant and dangerous hangovers related to shows whose participants have been selected on the basis of national identity and which are executed by the powerhouse's of the art world, not only in terms of the exhibition but the accompanying publications which canonise these shows in their authoritative presence in libraries across the world. Could you perhaps comment on this and maybe identify some of the most notable attempts to rectify this?**

AD: The national model as a curatorial remit, as is the case with any identitarian model, will always present artists and curators with a conundrum: artists from, say, the Middle East or China must wear, if not the fixity, then the fixture of their otherness – their national, political, social and artistic identities – on their sleeves if they are to enter artistic discourse in the west. The more specific problem is that the national model of representation, the model that takes a regional geographic rubric for interpreting practices, has been effectively nullified by the fact that it was a political model deployed by colonial and orientalist systems of thought: the region in question – defined as a vague non-western hinterland at best – came to define and prescribe a whole group of people regardless of the cultural differences that existed among them. This served an economic function, of course. Today, the legacy of such forms of totalising, reductive thought still define the critique of such shows when we see them in western institutions: how can we still talk about Chinese, Indian, or Iranian art in such reductive terms? Surely there are huge differences between generations of artists in these countries not to mention practices. And yes, this is true. But, perhaps, there is something to be still had in such models if they are applied with historical and heuristic nuance, and with an eye on the fact that all art is made in relation to other art.

There have been shows that have managed to bypass these forms of reductiveness and go beyond simplistic national models while still managing to retain both a sense of a dialogue with an artist's background and the fact that art as a practice often refers to other practices. Okwui Enwezor's Documenta 11 stands out in this respect inasmuch as he managed to introduce artists to a western audience without prescribing their work to any predefined tropes. Manifesta 7, which involved an international group of curators including Adam Budak, Anselm Franke, Hila Peleg, and the Raqs Media Collective (Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi, Shuddhabrata Sengupta), also managed to put on an interestingly diverse show that refused any easy forms of curatorial definitiveness. The nadir of recent shows that attempted to bring together artists from a 'region', however, had to be the so-called African Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale, a shockingly misconceived idea both at the time and in retrospect.

GL: **How much responsibility do you think should lie with the artists who agree to participate in these shows?**

AD: Very little to be honest. Artists need to make money to support their practice. Shows precipitate sales. No shows invariably means no sales. No sales, if artistic practice is your primary means of support, means penury – and I do not think that serves the purpose of anything other than some romantic ideal of the starving artist in the garret.

GL: **At the end of your article 'Curating Africa: 'Africa Remix' and the Categorical Dilemma'[1] you asked 'what curatorial and organisational methodology can an institution exercise that avoids homogenising, spectacularising, exoticising, or, indeed, prescribing a survey of contemporary African cultural production?' The question remained unsolved. Have you encountered any further evidence, since you wrote that essay, which suggests that this particular (and perhaps most difficult) curatorial challenge is closer to arriving at a solution?**

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Anthony Downey, 'Curating Africa: 'Africa Remix' and the Categorical Dilemma' in *Wasafiri*, No. 46, Winter 2005

AD: I think the situation has actually taken a turn for the worse. I just noted that I wrote that essay in 2005 so I would have mostly likely have been researching it in and around 2004; that is, 6 years ago. In that time, shows of African art have decreased significantly. This would be a good thing if we were seeing more shows of individual artists from, say, Malawi or the Congo, but we are not. It seems, after the excitement aroused by China, that the so-called Middle East is attracting the most attention today – for better or indeed worse. And the same issues are arising that we saw in the curatorial production of 'African' art: survey shows of artists that fail to note differences between regions, artists and, perhaps even more worryingly, the way in which their practices are often an explicit engagement with art as a practice in the first place.

GL: **Do you think that exhibitions based on national identities will ever become exhausted, will we ever get over it and see artists as artists and not what their passport prescribes or will the thrill of discovery continue to run through the curator's veins, much like the explorer? Conversely, would it be worse to ignore the artist's nationality?**

AD: Perhaps this returns us to the notion of ethical criticism: to what extent does language, curating, criticism, and contemporary art theory prescribe our relationship to the work and thereafter offer a limited mode of analysing it that is based upon institutional, economic, and political motivations? Can a form of ethical criticism, one that avoids normative, morally-inclined modes of critique, produce a situated, case-by-case analysis of singularities that would allow nationality to be taken into consideration without it becoming a pre-determinate model of analysis? I would suggest that ethics could be thereafter reinterpreted as a form of critical responsibility towards the object and the circumstances of its production rather than just another marketing tool in the production of a movement or regionally-inclined interpretation of art.

I am currently interested in the way in which the Middle East is fast becoming the focus for western institutions and collectors alike. Curators are attempting to offer degrees of nuance to interpretations but it often seems that they are at odds with institutional priorities. There is an argument to be had, given the west's

refusal to understand the distinction between, say, Iran and Syria and Lebanon, that a curatorial approach that draws attention to such distinctions would be welcome; however, the national can never be used to somehow define what an artist does – the practice of making art goes beyond such easy definitions.

GL: **Your forthcoming publication on the 'aesthetics of the real' will examine artists who engage with issues such as community, ethnography, human rights, re-enactment, migrations, and terrorism. Could you tell us a bit more about this publication?**

AD: Needless to say, this is work-in-progress and changing on a day-to-day basis. On a very basic level, I want to explore the implications of artistic practices co-opting a community or individual, sometimes consensually, other times through cajoling or indeed for remuneration, into an aesthetic practice. I want to also enquire into whether the aestheticisation of the real in contemporary art practices, be it in forms of co-optation or the re-presentation of communities, reveal (somewhat paradoxically) a process of de-aestheticisation: a desire in contemporary art practices to *become* more real than the referent – and, if so, why? This is not, I should note from the outset, an attempt to rehearse the defeatism of a Baudrillardian-inspired belief in the conceptual bankruptcy and devolved authority of reality in the face of a simulated reality – the scenario whereby representations or re-enactments of the real become the reality of the real – as it is to enquire into why a significant number of contemporary artists, in their aesthetic practices, attempt to elide any distinction between aesthetics (the mimetic representation of the real and the regime in which we understand art today) and the so-called real.

The other key question that motivates this book from the outset is an enquiry into whether the practices discussed throughout are, somewhat paradoxically, in the *public interest* inasmuch as they question, in the name of dissensus (disagreement), consensual forms of moral communalism (based upon the politics of neo-liberalism) and the often trite use of the term 'rights' in such environments? Or do they, conversely, merely parody or indeed mimic dissensus for the gratification of an art audience who remain seldom shocked, not to mention an art market that subsists on the 'shock of the new'.

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