

03 | Situation of Curatorial Practice in Asia and Europe

Across Divides and Beliefs

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This paper serves to recapture the presentation „Exploring New Curatorial Strategies“ I gave at the workshop to recollect the exchanges with the participants, resource persons and organisers that have not been previously documented, and to delve further into some issues touched on during the workshop.

Certain issues that I think have not been discussed enough during the workshop are the following:

1. How do roles and qualities, which are projected via cultural and individual identities constructed by a certain culture and a bigger group's agenda, become representations that serve the practice or propaganda of multi-and inter-culturalism?
2. How does the “self” perceive its position in contestation with the positions determined and bestowed by others?
3. How does the dynamic relationship between art and language influence the translation of knowledge across modernity and belief systems?

Other issues that I mentioned in these exchanges are on the acquisition of criticality in our profession and activities in order to reach a methodology that is responsive and meaningful to one self but also positive and constructive for our partners, collaborators and audiences.

I am looking at the process of translation of knowledge and communication across belief systems which also include communicating between or across constructed “barriers” within cultures (the definition of which is not easily defined and problematic but conventionally used). This barrier needs not to be a physical one, but can be in the mental spaces of members in each society, and be divided under categorisation of classes, races, religious groups and attitude on sexual practices, etc.

Whilst politically motivated communication activities aimed at celebrating multiculturalism are conventionally defined through boundaries of nation states, regional geographic and economic interests, those who seek a better understanding need to look critically beyond these convenient classifications.

Sustainable communicative spaces and channels for tension and negotiation

Looking into the micro level of social communication processes and with reference to the Indonesian context, we will observe the complexity within the Javanese culture alone: how the choice of words used in greetings alone denotes their social standing and understanding of their respective positions amongst each other. I wonder how short term visitors (such as the participants to this workshop) can be aware that they are in fact in contact with different groups of people like Javanese, Sundanese, and many “others”.

These groups have coexisted while negotiating tensions and common goals efficiently for centuries, but when macro management rises in coordination with the government within certain economic sectors, dysfunction creeps into the picture.

Learning from these information and past experiences, working across cultures and networking would have to begin with building up a sustainable communication that recognises the needs of respective participants. Looking at the theoretical critical discourses that I use to set up the perimeter of analysing and reflecting communication processes that influence my methodology, such as Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, New French Theory and J-F Lyotard, limitations of these theories appear when they have to be applied across belief systems. There are indeed fundamental differences in priorities between the systems and the definitions that are associated with meanings of essential terms/concepts upholding the stability within a social system.



According to post-structuralist theories, the generation of meaning within a belief system and culture will form and inform that particular culture's language. Languages differentiate meaning and not just make references to meaning, resulting in the difficulties associated with the translation of text. We need to know the differences of meaning in each language in order to make an "accurate" translation.

Therefore in cross cultural discourses, it is important to recognise the need and responsibility to properly understand each individual's process of producing and defining meaning and for these to be clarified before placing these various meanings for further examination.

Failure to create a space to allow this debate and contestation of meanings and their articulation are the major blocking stones in most inter/cross cultural discourses. These theories have been affirmed through my research via feedback from organisers of large scale international exchanges and dialogues where European and Asian art and cultural organisations meet. The feedback reports the discrepancies to communicate between the parties when the English language is used and the one-sidedness of communication direction. However, I believe that blame should not rest on one party, but that all parties are equally responsible to make communication work. An artist from Kuala Lumpur, Yap Saubin, who is engaging in critical dialogue with IFIMA² on Asian regional resource development, refers to the shyness of many Asian participants to speak up in international exchanges as a condition of "anxiety of articulation".

In such intercultural dialogues, it is not only the incapacity of articulation that constitutes obstacles but also the "arrogance of reputation", by which I mean not only an unwillingness to receive "meanings" outside of the established ones within a particular language, but also a way of exercising one's judgment that refuses to allow other interpretations or judgment that is not based on one's own value system. This criticism applies to those using "universalised" criteria as well as those using values of "local" heritage.

In the project and event **Urban Realities Focus Istanbul in Berlin**³, this kind of "arrogance" reared its head in the form of refusal to allow a space for discourses and negotiations between the organiser and the participants living in Turkey. The denouncement of all the various feedback and disagreements regarding the logistic and conceptual issues of this project as manifestations of "fundamentalism" (as told by one of the participants) led to an exclusion to all those who raised the issues. The organiser, with an impressive record of many years in managing successful international intercultural residency organisation, created a buzz again in a public presentation in the House of the Cultures of the World during an international panel on the issue "Curating Difference"⁴ by leaving the panel immediately after his talk as the first speaker without giving anyone a chance to engage his presentation. However, in his "talk" he managed to create a stir by labelling the 2nd generation of Turkish persons born in Germany as immigrants and made the generalisation that their "non-German" attitude was a refusal to integrate and was fundamentalist grounded. It seems to me that the West is only able to categorise "others" that differ in opinion and action from the "West" as a single resisting fundamentalist entity.

Multiculturalism and identity problems

Other common traits observed during multicultural projects and shows are the use of identities created through geographical position as cultural cloaks easily shared among participants suggesting common histories and goals. Also, if these shows are organised by curators of Asian origin it seems that the show will automatically be excused from any criticism of being condescending and harbouring imperialistic intentions.

Little was learnt from such mega shows as **Cities on the Move**⁵ that resulted more in disregard than consideration of identities and differences, promoting superficiality that can also be found in shows such as **Tension/Tradition**⁶. The recent show **Politics of Fun South East Asia**⁷ added another notch to this by trying to make up for a weakness in the conceptual aspect of the art works and presentations, while using design elements to enhance the visuality. It should be perhaps



renamed "Politics of Design" just to retain a projection of criticality that is supposedly associated with the term "politic". The added mileage gained from what can be read as token of participation of an artist from Myanmar (Burma) resulted in his video work being presented on a small TV on the floor, surrounded with a black threaded curtain as a design element. Maybe this was an "intentional" sanction. And perhaps it was the "politics of global consumerism" that jetted the site specific performance "Artist Investigating Monument" by Singaporean artists Lee Wen and Kai aka Lam Hoi Lit (one of the performances featured in the **Politics of Fun** exhibition), conceived to investigate the meaning, power and history of monuments in Singapore, causing it to be understood as migrant workers cleaning the Henry Moore sculpture, "Butterfly", in front of the House of the Cultures of the World.

Getting out of one's comfort zone

Maybe this shows a lack of critical competence in carrying out cross cultural work at different levels, wherever and whatever site or culture may be. Does acquiring critical competence come from acquiring a reflective and open methodology after a "re-learning" process regarding the comfort of one's own cultural mindset? There is certainly no immediate remedy or solution when we have to consider additional hurdles such as translation of text and knowledge, disparity of educational and cultural backgrounds that constitute the diversity that we have to encounter daily and engage with in cross and inter cultural situations resulting in emotional anxieties, frustrations and dissatisfaction, e.g. feelings of inadequacy of articulation, of being overpowered by an unwelcomed universality, etc.

Real life and feedback

Using our TMFC workshop as an example, the failure to clearly communicate the intention of the "fictitious" project resulted in the resistance of the participants to put the early discussions from the workshop on theoretical explorations such as on the issue of identity, curatorial strategies, etc. into an "imagined" practice. With the exploration of the group "Curating across Cultures and Exploring New Strategies" to implement an "imagined" project, such as a cross cultural journal, the participants felt that they were being manoeuvred into an enterprise too prematurely. Gone was this chance to test the limitation of theoretical discourses against practice. It can be seen that good intention is seldom enough as transparency and accountability also contribute as decisive factors to success. Local partners in cross cultural collaboration with international cultural organisations often complain that being invited to an organised meeting based merely on good intentions, amounts to nothing if they could not contribute equally to the process, address their own needs, and receive rightful recognition and engagement. For example, conducting a meeting that includes a language not understood by other parties, hardly transmits trust nor shows respect and would seem like merely "giving air" to other parties' positions while neglecting to engage or to make effort to implement these positions or to find ways to address the needs of these parties. This will make a farce out of the whole exercise and generate ill feeling for any other future collaboration.

In the run up to the event, failure to make use of the ample time allocated for the participants either to get to know each other or issues relevant to the workshop led to a slow start and even now after a few months, consistent consultation/discussions to initiate some constructive collaboration still could not take effect. Some of the resistances are brought on by inflexibility in personal mode of communication, not realising that a workshop requires participants to change and forget personal inflexibility in favour of fostering group dynamic. After all, the main goal of the workshop is to foster collaboration and to establish networks across cultures.

Enough is enough

Why did visiting participants feel that the audience in Bandung was speaking in an unintelligible language? And I observed that the small audience in Jakarta gave absolutely no response to the presentations in form of questions. Referring to the Bandung's audience, a participant from Jakarta said that they would not know how to discuss or get to the point and are poor in formulating their ideas. Was he being apologetic that such events, taking place in a foreign



cultural institute, have to conform to foreign etiquette or is there already a universality that everyone has to follow? Do foreign cultural institutions with their numerous years of operational experience not recognise or at least develop certain ways of bridging this communication gap for such a “show and tell” event? And how did the foreign guests expect the audience to react?

Maybe the audience in Jakarta was “awe n struck” speechless by the imposing images of super mega world events such as the last **Documenta** in Kassel, Germany, and maybe they were left dumbfounded and could not find a way to relate it to their local context. Some talks by selected participants of the workshop were carried out in a way of personal narrative without creating a common platform that could be shared with the audience. This of course would not illicit responses as it does not reach out to the interest, knowledge or practices of the audience.

“Show n tell” carries little value and when excluding references to the context on site will certainly not convey any messages in any cross or inter cultural communication that try to connect. Even criticality and communication will not be enough to bridge the numerous factors that are needed to make intercultural collaborations work. It will take all parties to make the effort and take the responsibility to “critically engage” for successful networking to take place.



¹ In reference to the article given to the participants in this workshop. It explored the relationship of the “self” with structures such as environment, identities created by the “self” or bestowed by the “other”. *Politics of the Self in the Negotiation of Solidarities* by Chu Yuan and in *Locus: Interventions in Art Practice* published by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, Manila, 2005.

² IFIMA International Forum for InterMedia Art: <http://www.ifima.net>

³ *Urban Realities: Focus Istanbul*, 9. Jul.-3. Oct. 2005. an exhibition by Künstlerhaus Bethanien GmbH curated by Christoph Tannert at Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin

⁴ An event of the ResArtis #10, *Sharing Cultures and Social Change*, 28th Sept.-2nd Oct., Berlin. www.resartis.org

⁵ A Mega Show curated by Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru that took place in Kiasma, Finland and Hayward Gallery, London in the late 90s.

⁶ An event of Asia Society, New York, 1999 curated by Dr. Apinan Poshyananda, Thailand.

⁷ An event in the House of the Cultures of the World, Berlin, 30th Sept.-20th Nov. 2005 curated by Ong Keng Sen and Gridthiya Gaweeewong