Tejpal S. Ajji, Jon Soske & Alissa Trotz in conversation

[*Apache Indian, "Arranged Marriage," music video stills, 1992. Courtesy of Universal Music.*]

South-South: Interruptions & Encounters

South-South: Interruptions & Encounters brought together eight artists whose work is situated at an intersection of African and South Asian history, politics, or culture. These encounters occur in a variety of forms and locations: Trinidad's Carnival; a South African ghetto; the music of Black Britain; a family's history of migration from East Africa; the colonial monuments of a historic slave port; a vial of perfume; and the actual speaking voice of an artist.

The eight artists work in a variety of different national and transnational contexts, including South Africa, Kenya, Trinidad, England, and Canada. However, each of their works engages one of the most contradictory legacies of European colonialism. Over the course of centuries, Africa and South Asia have been drawn together through Indian Ocean trade networks, systems of forced labour (like slavery and indenture), anti-colonial political struggle, and post-colonial migrations to Northern metropoles. At the same time, colonial racism—and later anti-colonial nationalism—frequently reified the difference between "African" and "Indian." South-South sought to envision new geographies of colonialism and its legacies, for example maps in which the imperial centre is displaced or moments when the Northern city becomes a site of transit and exchange between different regions of the South.

[*Louise Liliefeldt, "A Letter of Love,"; video still, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.*]

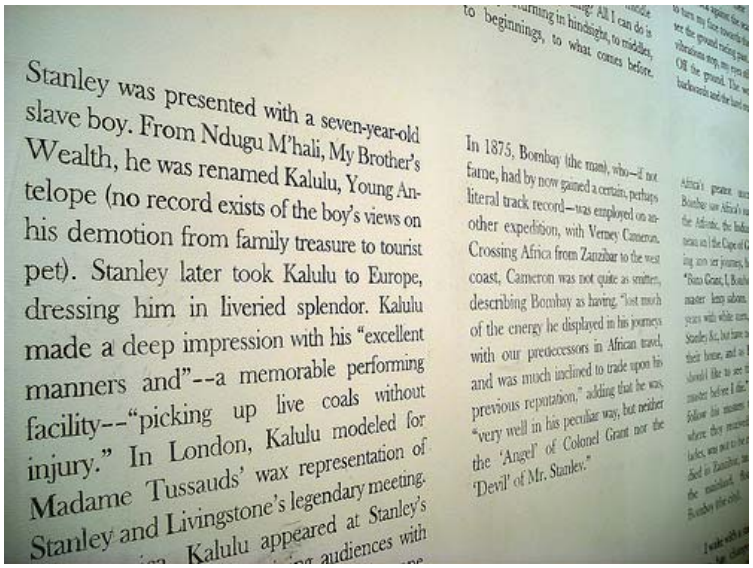
This exhibition was part of a year-long series of events organized by New College (at the University of Toronto) that brought together scholars, intellectuals, and activists from Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean as well as their diasporas. South-South Encounters: Conversations across Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean hoped to transcend the often artificial divisions inherited from colonial racial categories, Cold War geopolitics, and state-sponsored multiculturalism that continue to render histories that cut across categories like “Africa” and “India” either derivative of some pre-established identity or completely invisible. By discussing the interrelations, entanglements, and divisions within the colonial and post-colonial worlds, South-South Encounters also attempted to move beyond a generalized notion of the “Global South” and raise questions about new social and political configurations taking shape after the failure of the Third World project.

South-South: Interruptions & Encounters **ran from April 2 – May 19, 2009 at the Justina M. Barnike Gallery, Univerity of Toronto. It was curated by Tejpal. S. Ajji and Jon Soske and co-organized by the South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC). Participating artists included *Omar Badsha*, *Allan deSouza*, *Brendan Fernandes*, *Marlon Griffith*, *Jamelie Hassan*, *Apache Indian*, *Louise Liliefeldt*, and *Hew Locke*.**

[*installation shot*]

Trotz: The South-South catalogue, and in particular the essays by Mark Sealey and Christopher Cozier, warns of the dangers of appropriation in the form of curatorial practices that neutralize and contain the political import of work from the “Global South” under the rubric of difference. For example, Mark poses the following very sharp critique and question: “It’s also important to note that globalization has resulted in a new category of artist: the professional ‘other’ who, casual as you like, will claim the position of being ‘post-race,’ ‘Afro-politan,’ or ‘altermodern’ depending, of course, on whatever curatorial opportunity presents itself. Chameleon-like practice has now taken centre stage. What is left of and on the margins?” How did we envision this project as a series of conversations where pathways/routes rather than cul-de-sacs/containment was the raison d’etre? Where relationality was foregrounded?

Ajji: As a strategy we choose not to commission new works from the artists (except from Louise Liliefeldt who produced *A Letter of Love*), rather acknowledging a set of existing projects, discussions, and similar trajectories between the artists and intersecting within the exhibition. The exhibition works were produced since the 1980s, although their own subject matter can be traced much earlier: the travelogues of an English colonialist documenting an East African translator inter-woven with a 20th century family history within deSouza's narrative; the Indian- and Kenyan-"inflected" English accents more than two hundred years in the making in Fernandes' video *Foe* (2003); the Hindu votive sculptures or Islamic tomb within Omar Badsha's photographs.



[*Allan deSouza, "Bombay," carbon transfer wall text, variable dimensions, (exhibition dimensions, JMB Gallery, 366cm x 610cm), 2009. Courtesy of the artist - detail*]

While each work, in some way, examined an intersection of "Africa" and "India," it was important to suggest a visual syntax between the works that could displace or interrupt the varying colonial, nationalist and other historical understandings of "African" and "Indian." And for this to be experienced through the construction of exhibition—the phenomenon of each visitor building sequences of encounters between works and histories—working towards the dynamic relationality you speak of. The interactions between the works needed to be open, layered, even discordant.
Our initial floor plan curiously grouped artists in hubs proximate to the Atlantic Ocean/Caribbean and the Indian Ocean with some correlation to sites in the North. In the end, we opted for a series of juxtapositions (temporal, sonic, geographic, bodily) through multi-conditional objects, which often traversed or tied together widely divergent locations. Mark Sealy warned of the de-politicization of exhibitions of the "South" through overly broad gestures, overwriting localized and regional political situations. We tried to use the agentive role of each artwork to stand in as a global positioning marker, and the artist as an ambassador, for geographies that both traverse the nation state and—lingering outside our current maps –complicate any unitary construction of the South, revealing ruptures as well as unlikely intimacies.

Our strategy also consciously looked towards aesthetic practices outside the art industry and academia, such as the music videos and LP covers of Apache Indian's "bhangramuffin." This work registered the limit of inclusion ascribed by the "gallery," questioned the rhetoric of inter-disciplinarity and foregrounded the failures of disciplined vision. We wanted to frustrate the patronizing gesture of elevating that which is outside art to the level of art, or subjugating it to the realm of ethnology. As the South-South panel series worked across a series of area specific debates, the exhibition worked through a series of intersecting aesthetic practices.

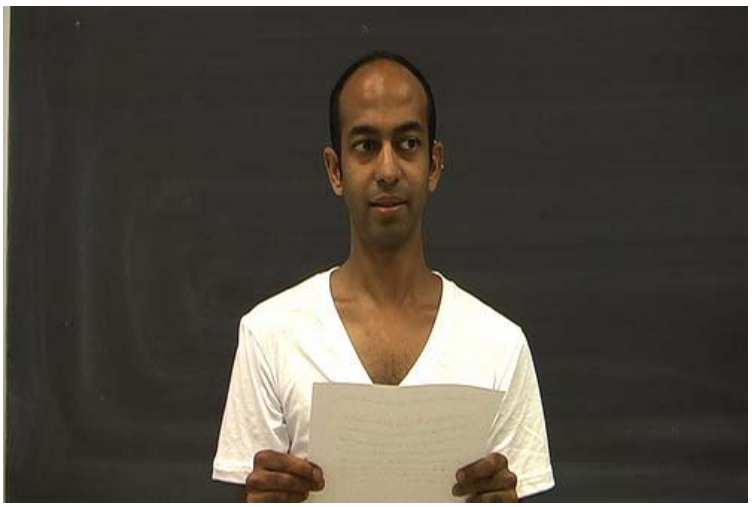
Trotz: This certainly raises the issue of the way in which visuality and space as conjoined analytics can enable thinking beyond the historicist (and linguistic) trap that obsessively returns to separate identities that are "always-already" in the making, and brings to mind the provocation at the end of the catalogue introduction: the suggestion that artistic practices can allow us to see certain new historical realities that we cannot yet name because of the historical grounding of our language in circumscribed discourses of race, culture, diaspora, and nation ("allied terms" that often simply stand in for each other). Is this the radical potential that art offers in this context? At the same time, I think that the South-South project as a whole also tried to engage with how space itself is non-innocent, implicated in these compartmentalized representations of race, culture, diaspora, nation, that it does not stand outside of these historical processes.

[*Omar Badsha, "Funeral, Cemetery, Brook," black and white photograph, 24cm x 30cm, 1980. Courtesy of the artist.*]

Soske: The first point that I would make is that the use of the term “site” allowed us to establish critical distance from the vocabulary of diaspora. Although writers like Paul Gilroy initially deployed this rubric to theorize a dialogic structure of identity shared–and contested–across enormous heterogeneities of historical, political, and cultural experience, this word has since flattened into another synonym for race. As a result, the problematic of identity often becomes the *a priori* theme around which historical or anthropological narratives are organized, reproducing the racial categories inherited from colonial governance and anti-colonial nationalism as the inevitable outcome of analysis. In the contexts that we were most interested in exploring (Kenya, Trinidad, Guyana, Black Britain, Natal), this framing leads to the thematization of the past in ethnic terms and generates a dangerous convergence between the terms of academic intellectual production and different forms of right-wing, communitarian nationalism.

It is, for example, common to see both artistic production and historical writing about Indian diasporas in East and Southern Africa in which the African majority scarcely exists. I would go so far as to argue that a certain tendency within diaspora studies adopts the epistemological standpoint of settler colonialism: it begins with the erasure of the historical “before” that always haunts and defines the present in much more complex and disturbing ways than can be captured by analyzing how a community is defined in relation to its “others.”

So how to get at that “before”? Influenced by the writings of people like Stuart Hall and Aisha Khan, we chose art works that explored sites of encounter—forms of entanglement, mixing, fusion, or interrelation that in certain respects are originary, preceding and continuing to exist within what later become clearly demarcated identities. We wanted to shift the focus from artistic embodiments of Indian or African identity to works that explored the spaces within which the borders between the “African” and “Indian” were simultaneously crystallized and interrupted. Consequently, we expanded our understanding of site to include moments of encounter ranging from the streets of parades of Carnival to the materiality of an artist’s voice.



[*Brendan Fernandes, "Foe," - video still, 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Diaz Contemporary (Toronto).*]

We were arguing that the aesthetics of these encounters could generate new appreciations of both local spaces and broader geographies. It is absolutely true that such locations must be understood as equally “constructed” and historical as racial categories. However, one of the most striking dimensions of space is that the mode of its production and reproduction operates through different mechanisms than the institutions regulating discourses, leading to possibility of highly visible disjunctions. In other words, the regimes of truth at work within discourse and the production of spaces can sometimes come into conflict. This argument suggests that we can use artistic practices (strategies of the visual production, performance, or conceptualism) to interrogate–even extend–our current

theoretical understandings: not because of a privileged relationship of sight to the real, but due to the different materiality of the two domains.

[*Bint el Sudan, perform bottle courtesy of Jamelie Hassan, acquired c.1978*]

Ajji: The "thematics of relationality," as manner of thinking through connections within the exhibition, is useful for considering how the sites Jon mentioned converge and confound the expectations of the terms "African" and "Indian" encoded within the visual and aural conditions of each piece. Through disjunctive elements between works (such as the multiple intricate components of Jamelie Hassan's Slave Letter (1983) to the rhythmic captivation and repulsion collocated in Louise Liliefeldt's video A Letter of Love (2009) and registering a work's temporal situation (a vial of perfume originally produced since 1920s, Black Britain in the early 90s, Grey Street of the 1980s), we offered a series of subtle arrangements between works and throughout the exhibition space: the physicality of text and materiality language (Jamelie Hassan, Allan deSouza, Omar Badsha, Brendan Fernandes, Apache Indian), the ironies of embodiment and composure (Apache Indian, Marlon Griffith, Louise Liliefeldt), the performance of authenticity (Brendan Fernandes, Louise Liliefeldt), and commercial flows indexed through material goods and cityscapes (Hew Locke, Omar Badsha). The phenomenon of moving through the exhibition space constructs and imagines the possibility of the artwork connecting a series of political and social conditions throughout history. This "time-travel" is the exhibition's offering, which helps trace itineraries less traveled or which text edits out.

Trotz: Another important lesson of South-South has to do with de-centering Toronto. I am thinking of anthropologist Sidney Mintz, who in a memorial lecture given over a decade ago made the point in relation to the Caribbean that it was here that 'the world' became a modern concept. In other words, the kinds of South-South circuits we wanted to track offered genealogies, clues to other paths travelled. I am always struck at how Toronto names itself as the multicultural city par excellence, because frankly what is celebrated here has such a longer history in the Caribbean, for example. It's nothing new. Naming it as new is a form of violence to these other histories and geographies.

[*Hew Locke, "Edward VII (Restoration series)," C-type photograph mounted on aluminum, MDF, and Formica with metal and plastic items affixed to front, 183cm x 122cm x 15cm, 2006*]

As referenced in your introduction to the catalogue, we were acutely aware of what at times seemed ironic: staging a South-South dialogue and encounter in the 'North'. We can come at this in a number of ways: the question of the diasporic (expressed here for us for instance in the fact that so many of the cultural workers who participated in the exhibition live or travel regularly across metropolitan cities or countries, or live in major cities even in the South); the way Hew Locke's layerings force one to confront empire materially and metaphorically; and the various circuits that produce the 'here' that we occupy. I think we recognized fairly early on that South-South could never only be about privileging conversations that relate to these spaces in isolation from the North, but about tracking the kinds of unexpected questions that emerge when we follow these less travelled itineraries.

How did foregrounding the problem of location require us to confront curatorial practice in Toronto? What kinds of questions are posed by this city space in a context where the exhibition could so easily have fit under a multicultural rubric in which pockets of difference are celebrated and managed while the mainstream remains relatively untouched? Toronto is perhaps one of the metropolitan sites where this staging was really in danger of getting read in a particularly Eurocentric way. This is in hindsight, but perhaps it underscored the relevance of precisely such a challenge, and therefore the importance of doing this in this city?

Soske: Toronto is remarkable not only for the size and sheer plurality of its diasporic populations (which is by now a something of a marketing cliché), but the different ways that they have made use of public space and the numerous histories that operate in the visual field. There are large sections of the city that feel like literal extensions, to take one example, of Hong Kong: most people interact in Cantonese; stores signs, bank service, restaurants all employ Chinese characters; the iconography is drawn from current Chinese popular culture, etc. In a real sense, these districts are not recreations of an elsewhere, but appendages of Asia, points where China is refracted through Canada. In contrast, many of the stores in "Little India," much of which is now owned by Urdu-speaking Pakistani immigrants, employ recognizably "Indian" symbols to attract tourists (many of which, like the Taj Mahal, simultaneously invoke a Mughal past) and consciously mobilize a Commonwealth, and even British colonial, heritage. Of course, part of the work carried out by the language and institutions of multiculturalism is the translation of such heterogeneity—of history, or aesthetics, of social strategy— into a manageable form of "diversity."

[*Omar Badsha, "Tailor and Partner, Grey Street," black and white photograph, 24cm x 30cm, 1984. Courtesy of the artist.*]

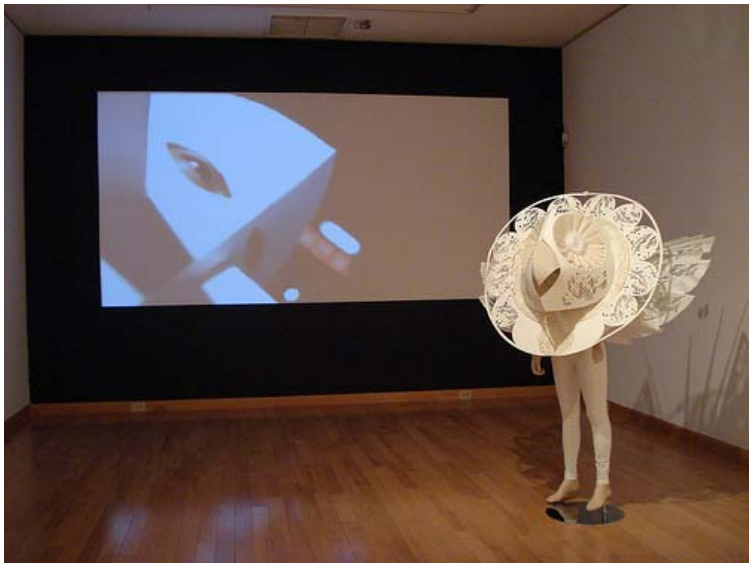
With respects to contemporary art, the discourses of multiculturalism and diversity are profoundly constricting, crippling. They draw every discussion of visual practice back to the thematics of identity and authenticity, which consigns the artwork to the role of a convenient stage to act out an incredibly scripted drama regarding race and national identity. Any serious analysis of the work—and particularly art that subverts this script and poses more challenging political questions about capital, class, imperialism—is precluded. There is no room for wonder, surprise, intellectual difficulty, or beauty. The art leaves you completely unchanged.

The problem here is much more fundamental than liberal tokenism. It concerns the way in which Canadian nationalism is often narrated through a form of racial allegory: artists or curators are placed in the position of acting as ready-made illustrations of an "immigrant experience" or "minority experience" that is meaningful only in so far as it comes to symbolize a shared, multicultural patrimony. This framework also establishes an "official" oppositional space—the struggle for inclusion, incorporation, and visibility within institutions whose authority remains intact, even strengthened. At the same time, the lexicon of diversity allows many in the art world to dismiss those who work outside the incredibly narrow boundaries of Euro-American modernism as "identity politics" art–even when their work has relatively little to do with "identity" *per se*.

[*installation shot*]

I think one strategy that we employed in disrupting this narrative was to insist on a certain level of artistic quality—as unnerving as that word is to define—and even difficulty to the art works. Many of the pieces would *not* be immediately legible to the audience since the stakes of their artistic practices were situated within histories that cut across several cultures, regions, and historical periods. This was true even of some of the most popular and accessible forms included in the show: Apache Indian's music videos (which work between Caribbean, British, and Punjabi musical styles and performance cultures) or Omar Badsha's documentary photographs (which narrate the entangled histories of an apartheid city and everyday gestures resisting its mechanisms of dehumanization).

Other works—like Hassan's "Slave Letter" or Locke's pieces—were quite conceptually driven in how they deployed the specific histories and materiality of objects. While trying to bring together a collection of works that offered a number of different entry points to a range of audiences, we also chose pieces that would force viewers to grapple with history and geography otherwise. I think that we were fairly demanding of the viewer: he or she would have to work to understand the geographies traced by the show, and that process would take them elsewhere, someplace either unfamiliar or at least de-familiarized.



[*Marlon Griffith, "Hukaro," handmade Washi paper sculpture, variable dimensions, 2005-2009. Courtesy of the artist.*]

Ajji: While decentering Toronto through a critique of multiculturalism, one confronts not only the disregard of previous histories of intersections, such as in the Caribbean, but the occlusion of the histories within the multicultural rhetoric. Time starts when multiculturalism begins, and within the representational field, bodies and “diasporas” are registered as essentialized caricatures (managed as images of dress, cuisine, the aesthetics of language, etc.) and more-or-less confined to certain sections of the city.

The often location-derived nature of the artworks challenged this type of multicultural personification. The artists often act in or refer to a site (a public square in Gwangju, statuary in the city of Bristol, Cape Town through a newspaper) producing an artwork suffused with their own bodies (by the act of creating the work in situ, collecting objects from a geographic coordinate, or recording their presence within an image frame). In doing so, the works registered a series of political inscriptions—biography included (though not exclusively)—rendered through aesthetic modes which enabled us to conceive of an expanded notion of site, which move beyond the site of production or reference, entering the gallery as a set of “convergences.”

[*Marlon Griffith, "Runaway Reaction," performance with compressed foam and fabric costumes at the 7th Gwangju Biennial (Gwangju, Korea), 2008. Photograph by Akiko Ota. Courtesy of the artist.*]

To unpack these convergences, *South-South* attempted to address a broad curatorial framing dilemma: How to consciously provide a suitable companion text available in the exhibition space to supplement the exhibition experience. A text which acknowledged the socio-cartographic descriptions (spatial and linguistic) necessary to gain control over a space one has not visited, the often binding and conflicting nature of biography, and the semi-autonomous nature of the art objects.

The catalogue essay implicitly interrogated the requirements necessary to produce, offer or suggest meaning within an exhibition working is so many terrains. This to enliven the pedagogical value of the curatorial text—written from within a university—yet to avoid a didacticism negating the possibility of envisioning new configurations and constellations produced by the viewing and exhibition participation experience.

Soske: It is also important to discuss some of the modes of collaboration that we developed in this process. In many academic contexts, artists are invited to contribute for merely pedagogic or didactic purposes—or an art exhibition is attached to a conference in order to facilitate a broader public engagement. The visual remains adjunct, suspended in between evidence and illustration.

Basically, the exhibition is where everyone goes to drink wine after they have finished the “serious” work of giving and listening to talks. Not only is there little serious engagement with the artwork, but the idea that the artwork or artists have major interventions to make in the broader intellectual discussions never really gets entertained.

From early on in our conversations about this project, we recognized that we wanted to develop a different model that drew on the specific forms of experience and knowing facilitated by art work. How does artistic production open new domains of South-South analysis? As artists increasingly mobilize strategies of archival research and ethnography, how might the use of different aesthetic strategies—especially an expanded engagement with new media—transform historical and social scientific research? How can we think differently with art?

These questions proved more far more challenging than any of us initially expected. The curators and historians/social scientists involved in this project started with very different ideas of rigor, how to address our audiences (even who they were), and what constituted effective work. Developing a shared analytic vocabulary involved series of incredibly intense and involved conversations over the course of a year and a half. Some of the obstacles to this type of project are institutionalized. On the one hand, many people within and outside the university still perceive the art gallery as a space for performing insider knowledge: the rituals, etiquette, and forms of socializing of the art industry remain enormously alienating, even for many people who want to find a way to engage with art.

Although a number of academics came to the show in the end and seriously grappled with the work, it required a substantial amount of individual outreach to break down some of these barriers. On the other hand, the majority of intellectuals outside of the art world do not possess a basic analytical lexicon or points of reference to talk about contemporary art: their idea of art remains mired in the concepts of like beauty and representation. As a result, they have little sense of the conceptual, theoretical, and socio-political stakes of contemporary art practice.

Ajji: Legibility is a concern when working in any interdisciplinary context. Political responsibility must be accompanied by acknowledging parallel traditions and include processes during which critical languages undergo translation—which make this a collective lexicon building task, and as we proposed, one which integrates the visual field. It is nonetheless critical for us to examine the convenient forms of lecture, panels, etc., and the affects these formats have on controlling the speed and efficiency of discourse. When the same formats get replicated, the academy over-produces a spectatorship model of learning which is less effective at mobilizing, at least among students, critical skills to grasp cross-area methodologies in forms outside the strictly discursive or inter-textual.

[*Brendan Fernandes, "Foe," video stills, 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Diaz Contemporary (Toronto).*]

Brendan Fernandes’ workshop and the fourth year seminar led by Jon were productive solvents mediating the relationship between the South-South program, academy and exhibition. Fernandes expanding on his work *Foe* with a group of students from the University’s area studies and art programs. The two-day sessions explored the performative aspects of language and accent through a set of discussions, readings and screenings, after which, the group, as a “choir,” recited a passage of J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1987), ostensibly the script for Fernandes’ work, in the “Kenyan-,” “Indian-,” and “Canadian”-English accents derived from artist’s video. And Jon’s *South-South Encounters* class hosted a great traffic of artists, activists and theorist-academics (Louise Liliefeldt, Brendan Fernandes, Vijay Prashad, Omar Badsha), encouraging students from a range of area studies to engage with the broader panel series, screenings, and exhibition, while discussing academic and artistic material representing several intellectual traditions. The class was a proposition to the students to act on South-South, even as it interfaced within their biographies.

To add a contrasting narrative to the unresolved tension—between the visual/performative and discursive, we need to address some origins of this divide. Arts workers—artists, curators, art historians—in the academy are still managing the aftermath of avant-gardism of the early 20th century. The avant-garde(s) rigorously constituted new autonomy—from history, the academy most certainly, even from other movements in art, and envisioned almost as a total world-view (recall Futurism was not just about art rather how the whole world could be a new Futurist order). According to this dominating lineage of Western contemporary art, and all too significant one of separatism and invention, the question is also posed: how does art and curating [re]-integrate within the academy?

Trotz: It’s so imperative for us to think about intellectual production more widely, and I agree with Tej’s injunction to creatively

challenge the divide between the academy and exhibition space. At the same time, we should be wary of romanticizing public space as if it is somehow necessarily oppositional (feminists know the dangers of this only too well), and to incorporate into our pedagogical approaches a sense that space is dynamic, processual, to see it as produced through various forms of practices that are always interested, always non-innocent. For me, the workshop and the class (which also brought undergraduate and graduate students together) offered the most potential for moving beyond spectatorship models. Certainly students in these sites were the only ones involved in a sustained way in all aspects of South-South programming this year, tracking bits and pieces from one space into another, mixing things up, in ways that were transformative for them and us.

Despite everything we accomplished, I'm not sure that area studies in its present configuration holds the potential to offer the kinds of lessons we've been raising (just consider its emergence in the US academy in relation to a foreign policy apparatus whose language was one of containment, or in the Canadian academy where it often gets tethered to the politics of multiculturalism). It also returns us to the question of location that was raised earlier (area studies, after all, is an invention of Euro-America), prompting perhaps a more modest reflection on what it was about these spaces that we wanted to critically intervene in, as opposed to thinking about a more grand destabilizing promise.

Perhaps the most we can say (and this is still a lot) was that in our encounters this year we started to unlearn – through practice – the various ways in which we insulate 'areas' from each other in the academy. It required us to confront the challenges ahead when we are already struggling for our survival as small and cash-strapped undergraduate programmes, because we live in a world in which such conversations across our institutional boundaries can be misread in our neoliberal present as fulfilling broader university mandates of efficiency, erasing the promise of what I think we were working towards.

The institutional barriers to decolonization are immense, and a potentially radical move can be co-opted and neutralised so swiftly. This was, after all, a one year experiment. The exhibit has gone, the seminars are archival material. There are no faculty lines, no curricular arrangements that can as yet speak in a sustained way to what it was we were trying to gesture towards. For me, this is why South-South was really less for us to romanticize– although we should never belittle the incredible labour of love that it represented –than the recognition of vulnerability and limit: not just of what we are struggling towards, but what we are up against.

This entry was posted on Saturday, March 27th, 2010 at 4:47 pm and is filed under Alissa Trotz, Apache Indian, Brendan Fernandes, Hew Locke, Jamelie Hassan, Jon Soske, Louise Liliefeldt, MARLON GRIFFITH, Omar Badsha, Tejpal S. Ajji, vocabularies. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.

2 Responses to "Tejpal S. Ajji, Jon Soske & Alissa Trotz in conversation"

1. *Kylie Batt* Says:
   April 16th, 2010 at 7:22 pm

   Подскажите мне пожалуйста, где я могу об этом прочитать?…

   потенциальному 2-3
   [Apache Indian, "Arranged Marriage," music video stills, 1992. Courtesy of Universal Music…..

2. *Kylie Batt* Says:
   May 4th, 2010 at 2:06 pm

   По моему мнению Вы ошибаетесь. Предлагаю это обсудить. Пишите мне в PM, поговорим….

   These encounters occur in a variety of forms and locations: Trinidad's Carnival; a South African ghetto; […….