

INDIA INK, MANILA ENVELOPE:

Three Meditations on Art and The Global Media

Ranjit Hoskote

Prelude: The Empty Orchestra

The extent to which we have ceded our human powers to machine surrogates and delegates is piquantly captured by that delightful Japanese portmanteau word, karaoke. The word combines the elements “kara,” meaning empty, and “okesutra,” which is the Japanese form of the English “orchestra.” The image of an empty orchestra producing music — of an ordinary singer who is transformed into a soloist with the support of a pre-recorded backing — leads us to one of the central myths of our age. And, let us make no mistake, this is a myth of transformation.

But it is a transformation myth with a difference. While such myths, in earlier epochs, involved the inner change of the self through grace or enlightenment, its dismemberment and reconstitution at a higher level of integration and awareness, the myth of self-transformation by karaoke enshrines a pretend-transformation, a temporary glory dependent on technological props. Tragically, and entirely in keeping with the propensity of contemporary culture towards the emptying, dissolution and fragmentation of experience, this contemporary myth of transformation emphasises the concealment of absence rather than the renewal of presence. In this sense, the soloist buoyed up in the karaoke bar is rather like the ordinary conjuror who manipulates a forbidding magician's mask to play the Wizard of Oz in L. Frank Baum's engaging tale.

We tend, increasingly, to be absent, elsewhere; and while we are absent, elsewhere, it is our mechanisms and prostheses, our electronic and cybernetic extensions that speak, act, and even alter reality on our behalf. Sometimes, this choice of mediating reality through a technological buffer has the effect of cocooning us from direct experience. At other times, it saves us the bother of direct expression and even borrows glory for us. At yet other times, it delivers us a version of actual events in which all the roughness and immediacy of the original has been planed down for our easeful benefit. In the matter of the reproduction of music, for instance, we now tend to subordinate the reality of the performance — with all its unevenness, its live brilliance or dullness, its action-in-the-moment quality — to the perfection of the doctored recording. The slickness of tracks that have been electronically engineered ensures that errors are deleted, unpredictable mutations and other blips sorted out: the music seems to have been produced by humans who can make no mistake, and precisely because of this, the performance seems scarcely credible, scarcely even a human production. For is it not dual-edged fallibility, the proneness to error but also the risk that stimulates creativity, that is the definitive mark of the human presence?

In the production of music, too, many of us now resort to devices like synthesizers and samplers, which save us the trouble of mastering a voice or an instrument. In film, as revolutionized by dedicated software, actors need not act too consistently well, because expressions and gestures can be cut-and-pasted from one reel to another. In life, likewise, we have answering machines and voice mail, which save us the trouble of speaking for ourselves or entering into direct encounter with possible interlocutors.

These technologies of delegation and surrogacy will, in time, allow us to retreat into an impenetrable privacy, while our cybernetic extensions act as our proxies. Although they are described as interactive systems, such gadgets actually lock us into a human-machine relationship, a dependency structure that permits us to lapse into a serene passivity in relation to the rest of the world (or into the condition that the philosopher Robert Pfaller wittily describes as “inter-passivity”). In other words, we are empty to the world, absent from the textures of human relationships, sitting in the audience watching the events of our lives unfold.

The individual self, it would appear, is increasingly being split into two. While one part performs the motions of social living, the other becomes committed to extreme privatism and withdrawal from the negotiations and transactions of the public sphere. This situation may seem, at least superficially, to bear a resemblance to that enshrined in the immortal Upanishadic image of the



two birds sitting on a branch — while one eats a fruit, the other watches the first one eat. But what is the inward significance of this image of the twin aspects of the self? It suggests that one can be both the performer of one's actions, full-bloodedly relishing the pleasure of experience, and also the witness of one's actions, reflecting on experience with detachment.

But when the technologies of delegation and surrogacy act as distancing devices, to promote and sustain an extreme privatism, the two modes of doer and witness become strangely fused. The act of reflecting on experience has itself become a way of savouring experience, relishing it from a distance without involving oneself in it. In the regime of the distancing devices, reality is never closer than a simulacrum, a virtual replica, a replay-mode version of itself: the war in Iraq and the massacre in Bosnia happen on television; the voices and instruments of Mali and the Andes are contained in a disc; all inquiries are held at bay by the beep on our answering machines. We can rewind and fast-forward them at will, re-set them: the hard practical consequences of decision and intervention having been removed, reality becomes almost an artefactuality. Worst of all, those aspects of reality that are edited out of the simulacrum/simulation version simply fall out of our world-picture. For instance, it is the NATO cosmology, broadcast over CNN and BBC, that defines the world for many young individuals in metropolitan Asia, rather than the local but paradoxically less visible actualities.

In the regime of the distancing devices, it is through pleasure or distraction rather than the discipline of critical attention that we extend our consciousness: they provide us with a way of remaining effectively absent while providing the illusion of presence, an emptiness that masquerades as a fullness. If we were to update the Upanishadic image for our own epoch, we might see the self less wholesomely, as a single bird on a branch, pecking at a virtual fruit that pixellates in its beak.

Crisis and Response

This essay was written in three cities, over three weeks. I wrote the final draft, surrounded by the steady chatter of light machine guns, the whine of rockets, the roar of grenades exploding in fortress courtyards. No, I had not strayed into a war zone with my file; I was sitting in an Internet café in Laoag City, in northern Luzon, trying to hear myself think above the cacophony of "Counter-strike," the computer game that has so captivated schoolchildren in the Philippines that they cut classes to play it. The soldiers around me are pre-adolescents, already conversant with the language and devices of war as they sit at their game stations; I remember that Mindanao and Bali are not too far away, and that the bombs going off there are all too real. I am reminded, also, of how sophisticated weaponry forms the main template for boys' toys in Bombay; and there, too, the riots and pogroms are not too far away.

This is not the only similarity between the Philippines and India. During the three-year process of conversation, research and discovery that "Clicking into Place" has been, I have become increasingly fascinated by the striking analogies, in culture and politics, between these two societies: the cycle of insurgency and authoritarian reprisal; the obsession with popular cinema; the use of the street as venue of mass protest; the invocation of mythic stages for contemporary dramas. I have found, also, an intriguing parallelism between the strategies of contemporary artists in both societies, who have become preoccupied with the neo-colonialism legislated into being by the protocols of the globalisation process.

In terms of aesthetic choices, both Philippine and Indian artists have shed, over the last decade, the Modernist preoccupation with the artistic self as an isolated subject exploring its interior realities in preference over a history that it has abolished. Instead, artists in both societies now view themselves as cultural producers acting in the context of an expressive culture that is widely ramified in both its processes and its products: they are now able to regard the making of formal art, not as a privileged practice of representation, but as one position along a wide spectrum of expressive practices. Both in India and the Philippines, artists now formulate their image-making languages in a manner that, while remaining critically engaged with international art practices, is imbued with the spirit of an idiosyncratic localism which is at once conceptually sophisticated and formally sensuous, politically vigilant and aesthetically replenished by encounter with other disciplines.

I would suggest that this transition from the doctrinaire closure of Modernism to the strategic responsiveness of the present is a result of the crisis that overtook contemporary Asian art during the last decade. It had already become evident to many younger artists that the modernist art-object was trapped in a semiotic dead end: framed, as it was, within the connoisseurial and commercial discourses of the studio/ gallery/ museum/ auction-house system, it was isolated from the wider and more urgent circulations of cultural and political meaning.

This gradual process of realisation achieved dramatic urgency when, during the early 1990s, the artist's claim to primacy in the sphere of imaginative visual representation was challenged by agents from outside the designated sphere of art-production. This challenge, which began innocuously enough with the advent of the video, increased in intensity as, successively, digitally enhanced popular cinema, 24-hour satellite television, computer-morphed advertisements, the music video, the Internet and the immersive virtual-reality environment transformed the nature of contemporary experience. These technologies of communication and representation are not merely novelties; they are reality-altering devices, mediatic structures that no longer mediate actuality, but shape it, together with the receiving consciousness, into a pervasive new counter-reality. Crucially, these mediatic structures operate through new visual surfaces and sensory architectures, making a claim on the attention with which art must compete.

As I read the situation, this crisis has had three major consequences for Asian art. First, it has underlined the need for new genres of visibility, so that the art object can hold the attention of viewers within the new frames of comparison, while maintaining its critical tenor. Second, it has summoned forth a new attitude towards communication, which has opened the so-far hermetic artwork to audiences, proposing a new sense of community. Finally, it has exposed the myth of the universality of meaning: by demonstrating the fragmentation of collective attention into specialist publics, interest groups and niche constituencies, it has broken down the view that artworks are universally executable programs. This has, in turn, opened the door to the representation of subcultures, subnational imaginaries, small Utopias in art. Acting under this rubric, the Asian artist can function as a provocateur who invents and engages a new public around a new symbolic economy. In effect, this means that Asian art must now prod into being a new public sphere, which is spread over material and virtual space, and involves both a sense of locality as well as that globality which is now inevitably parenthetical to the local.

Image as Critique

It was with such parallels between the two societies in mind that I began my investigation, leading to the exhibition "Clicking into Place," the India phase of "Under Construction," developed around the work of the painters Alfredo Esquillo, Jitish Kallat and Shibu Natesan, and the inter-media installer Baiju Parthan. Their work addresses the problematic raised by the artist and theorist Peter Weibel, who observes that the "globalisation of the media, desired by politics and the media, serves precisely [the] aim of achieving a diffusion of reality in which all news, be it false or true, every kind of observation, be it false or true, has its irreversible effect in reality, be it in appeal proceedings, elections or share prices... the mechanisms of the social construction of reality are increasingly being replaced by the mechanisms of media construction of reality..." [1]

To combat what Weibel aptly terms the "diffusion of reality," artists must recover the world from the givenness of images. This calls for a critical and even a detective cartography; one that does not trace the presumed continuities of the terrain of contemporary experience, but rather, marks interruptions in them, so as to make disclosures about the realities hidden beneath. It is not mere happenstance that cryptic narratives and deceptive gestures, sleight of eye and feint of gesture are so germane to this game. The images of Esquillo, Kallat, Natesan and Parthan function as critiques, notations in an ongoing guerrilla struggle against the imposition of official truths sanctioned by State and dominant culture. The criticality of their images is to be gauged by the manner in which these impact the world, by contrast, collision, interrogation.

Not surprisingly, morphing is a key trope in these pictorial fictions. Portraits signifying a bourgeois propriety suddenly turn into bizarre, even demonic occasions of rapine and torture through Esquillo's trenchant re-interpretation. Individuals come into sharp focus, only to ghost out and merge back into the crowd that Kallat conjures up as his vision of the metropolis. In Natesan's deadpan twisting of the tale, what you see isn't what you get, even when the painting has had its beginnings in a photograph. Parthan's web-based works carry the viewer-user into a labyrinth of mutating avatars. These artists adapt strategies freely from mediatic reality. Esquillo and Natesan use the photographic image *trouve*, archival or contemporary, formal portrait or accidental group, as a point of departure; Kallat inserts himself into scenarios drawn from the photographic image *trouve* or the movie billboard; Parthan registers the furthest remove from the space of painting, having turned increasingly towards the interactive, inter-media, web-based installation as his preferred mode of operation.

The only permanent address these artists offer is that of "between-ness": they are cartographers of *metatopia*, a "place-of-change," rather than of *utopia*, a "no-place." In constructing

1 "Map and Land, Media and Reality" (Eds. Peter Weibel and Timothy Druckrey), *net_condition: art and global media* (Karlsruhe, Graz and Massachusetts: ZKM Center for Art and Media / steirischer herbst / The MIT Press, 2001)

their versions of metatopia, Kallat, Natesan, Esquillo and Parthan deploy conventional and high-technology means, hand-crafted and readymade objects, as well as electronic and textual materials. Such combinations accurately incarnate the recycling economy that, rather than the throwaway economy of the industrially advanced nation-states, is typical of Asia.

Through the "Under Construction" process, I have also attempted to track the fate of figuration in contemporary Asian art. For many artists working in postcolonial Asia, through the 20th century, the commitment to a politics of resistance and hope has embodied itself in a dedication to the figure. In these accounts, the figure symbolises the human presence, emancipating itself from the tyrannies that seek to hold it down and transforming the world; it also identifies with the individual self as viewer. With the advent of globalisation, however, the individual self (as image-receiver) and the human presence (as image) has been claimed and fragmented on a scale unprecedented in history, re-distributed by invasive technologies and official mythologies that enslave even as they promise liberation and entertainment. The corporeal mystery of the figure has been translated into genetic data, encrypted as digital code.

How can Asian artists re-imagine the figure against such an experiential and semantic landscape? How is their revitalised figuration to maintain its radical impulse and circulate itself along the routes opened up by globalisation? How is it to engage its local audience in dialogue, while also resisting the blandishments of the global economy of image-consumption? Through their experiments, Esquillo, Kallat, Natesan and Parthan record how the figure can be re-oriented as a trope of contestation against the conscriptive systems and coercive ideologies that dominate our global present.