

Digressions from the Memory of a Minor Encounter

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Once, not so long ago, on a damp, rainy afternoon in Paris, a stroll took us across the Avenue d'Iéna, from contemporary art to ancient and medieval Asian art, from the Palais de Tokyo to the Musée Guimet. There, standing at the far end of the ground-floor section of the Guimet's permanent collection in front of a frieze from the Banteay Srei temple in Cambodia's Siem Reap province, we felt the sharp edge of estrangement in something that also felt downright familiar.

The Banteay Srei frieze narrates a story from the Mahabharata, a Sanskrit epic. The story is of two brothers, the demons Sunda and Upasunda, whose tussle over the attentions of Tilottama, an Apsara—a heavenly courtesan sent by the gods to destroy them with jealousy—was the cause of their downfall. Like most others who grew up listening to stories in India, we knew it well, even if only as an annotation to the main body of the epic. But it wasn't the details of the story that intrigued us that afternoon, nor the carved contours of Sunda and Upasunda's rage, not even the delicacy of the depiction of Tilottama's divisive seduction. Instead, standing before these stone images, made in a region roughly 3,500 miles to the east of where we live, in Delhi, and exhibited in a museum roughly 6,500 miles to the west, we felt compelled to think again about distance and proximity, and about how stories, images, and ideas travel.

The story of Sunda, Upasunda, and Tilottama was probably first told around 200 B.C. in the northwestern part of the South Asian subcontinent. Between the first telling of the story and the carving of the frieze in a clearing in the forests of Seam Riep in circa 967 lay a little more than a thousand years and an eastward journey of a few thousand miles. Between its carving and our sudden encounter with it in Paris, there lay a little more than another

millennium and a westward journey halfway across the world. These intervals in time and space were overlaid by an elaborate circuit that encompassed travel, conquest, migration and settlement, wars and violence, the clearing of forests, the quarrying of stone, slavery and indenture, skilled artisans, the faces and indiscretions of the men and women who would become the inspiration for jealous demons and divine courtesans, a few thousand years of history, the crossing of oceans, the rise and fall of several empires across different continents, and the repeated telling and forgetting of a minor story.

Contemporaneity, the sensation of being in a time together is an ancient, enigma of a feeling. It is the tug we feel when our times pull at us. But sometimes one has the sense of a paradoxically asynchronous contemporaneity—the strange tug of more than one time and place. As if an accumulation or thickening of our attachments to different times and spaces was manifesting itself in the form of some unique geological oddity, a richly striated cross section of a rock, sometimes sharp, sometimes blurred, marked by the passage of many epochs.

Standing before Sunda, Upasunda, and Tillottama in the Musée Guimet, we were in Siem Reap, in Indraprastha (an ancient name for Delhi, in whose vicinity much of the Mahabharata story is located), in New Delhi, in nineteenth-century Paris, and in the Paris of today. We were in many places and in many times. Sometimes art, the presence of an image, moves you. And you find yourself scattered all over the place, as a consequence.

How can we begin to think about being scattered?

Collections of objects from different parts of the world are indices of different instances of scattering. The minor encounter that we experienced in the Musée Guimet is one kind of scattering. It taught us that sometimes we encounter familiarity in the guise of strangeness and then suggested that we learn to question the easy binary shorthand of the familiar and the strange, as ways of thinking about ourselves, others, and the world. It suggested the possibility of other less polarized and more layered relationships between cultural processes. But this is not the only possible kind of scattering that the presence of images and stories echoing the familiar in uncanny ways provoke.

An increased intensity of communication creates a new kind of experiential contagion. It leads to all kind of illegitimate liaisons between things meant to be unfamiliar. The first thing that dissolves under the pressure of this promiscuous density of contact across space is the assumption that different degrees of “now” obtain in different places, that Delhi or Dar es Salaam are somehow less “now” than Detroit. The “nows” of different places leach into each other with increasing force. The realities of different contemporaneities infect each other. This condition generates active estrangement, a kind of nervous expulsion, a gladiatorial of repulsion scripted either through an orientation of contempt or of homage. Why contempt and homage? They permit the automatic assumption of a chasm between the beholder and the object of contemplation. The tropes of contempt and homage are an optic through which some perennially survey others and then evaluate them along an axis where the production of estrangement has to be resolved in terms of either positive or negative regard. The “survey” mode of understanding the world presumes a stable cyclopean and panoptic center of surveillance to which the gaze can never adequately be returned, ensuring that a meeting of visions will never take place on equal footing.

Like Sunda and Upasunda fighting over Tilottama, the more that different parts of the world come to be aware of each other’s desires, the more disputes there are over who has the greatest access to the contemporaneity both desire—the part of the world that has more confidence in itself or the one that has more of the élan of the “Other.” Key to this conflict of perceptions is a refusal to recognize that, like the sudden appearance of a Sanskrit story in a Khmer frieze in a Parisian museum to a collective of practitioners from Delhi, the relationships between familiarity and estrangement are compromised of many folds and cracks in space and time. Estrangement is only familiarity deferred or held in abeyance.

Rather than recognize the fact that familiarity and estrangement are only two non-distinct and contiguous instances of cognitive and affective transfer, this tendency to resolve the unfamiliar into the binary of the “like” and the “alien” needs constant mechanisms of reinforcement. The duality of contempt and homage is one such mechanism. In the first instance (contempt), the object

of the survey is pinned down in taxonomic terms, explained away to require no further engagement, making impossible the blurring of the distinction between the surveyor and the surveyed. In the second (homage), the object is exalted beyond the possibility of an engagement. In either case, a difference, once identified, becomes a factor of cognitive and affective excision. This forecloses the possibility of recognizing that what is identified and estranged may in fact be disturbingly similar to what is familiar, even though it may be located in realities that are difficult to translate with coherence or consistency. It is the inability to recognize the face of a stranger when you look at your own reflection.

The amalgam of the sensations of familiarity and estrangement evokes a new register of a tense accommodation, a hospitality to the presence of the “strange” that is not without attendant unease to the “familiar.” In the end, this may guarantee the disavowal of mutual antipathy and the cultivation of some sort of cohabitation. We can change the framework of the story on the Banteay Srei frieze. Sunda and Upasunda can both survive by agreeing to stay within the framework of a generous but awkward polyandry. They can do this by learning to negotiate with Tilottama’s claims on both their desires, and displaying a little more effort at being open to unpredictable encounters.

What does a little more by way of encounter attain in the domain of contemporary art? An assessment of the amplitude of signals and the intensity of contact that marks our world today is still waiting to be made. One of the ways in which this could be undertaken would be for us to try and account for the implications of the growth in Internet-based connectivity on a global scale. The Internet, as we know it today, is barely a decade and a half old, and its expansion can be dated to as late as the mid-1990s. Curiously, the expansion of the Internet and the recent expansion in the number of biennials have been co-incident with each other.

Today, it is estimated that 13.9 percent of the world’s population, or 888,681,131 people, have some kind of regular Internet access. The majority of Internet users live in North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of East Asia (South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and Singapore). World Internet usage grew by an estimated 146.2 percent from 2000 to early

2005, and the highest growth rates were in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Chinese is the second most used language on the Internet, and a country like India experienced a growth of 684 percent in Internet usage, from five million people in 2000 to 39.2 million in early 2005. It means that some thirty-nine million people in India (through labor, education, correspondence, and entertainment) employ, use, rely on a medium that enables an exceptional level of global reach. Actual figures are probably significantly higher, as most people in India and other similar societies tend to go online not from the computers that they own (since not that many people 'own' computers) or even computers that they might access at work, but from street-corner cybercafés. No other platform of communication in world history can claim that it has attracted the attention of 13.9 percent of the world's population in the span of ten years. Ten years is a very short time in the history of culture. It is the span between three Documentas or the time between the founding of the European biennial, Manifesta, and its fifth edition. If Internet usage continues to grow, at least at this rate, for the next twenty years, approximately seventy-five percent of the world's population will have initiated a deeply networked existence in the time it takes to produce the next four Documentas. Nothing has prepared us for the consequences of this depth and density of communicative engagement on a global scale. And unlike previous expansions in communicative capacity (print, radio, cinema, television), this time, with the Internet and new digital devices, we see readers, who are also writers and editors, users, who are also producers, viewers, who are also, at least potentially, creators, entering a global space of cultural production.

While it would be simplistic to argue for a cause-and-effect relationship between the expansion of the constituencies served by the Internet and the growth in number of biennials and other international art events, it would be equally facile to dismiss the implications of the emergence of this vast augmentation in global communication for the contemporary art scene.

What are these implications? Firstly, the discursive communities around contemporary art, like the discursive communities in science or politics, are poised to undergo a significant transformation. Secondly, an increasing diversity of positions vis-à-vis the role of authorship, creativity, and

intellectual property in the actual domain of global cultural practice are challenging the notions of bounded authorship that have dominated the concept of art production in the recent past. Both of these formulations need some elaboration.

The discursive framework of contemporary art, like any other domain of thought and practice today, can no longer be viewed as something that occurs only between an exclusive cognoscenti of curators, practitioners, theorists, and critics, residing in Europe and North America. Discursive networks can afford to practice an exclusionary mode of existence only at the risk of their own obsolescence. Every node in such a network survives only if it is able to affect a critical mass of new connectivities and be a conduit for new information about a very rapidly changing world.

In politics, it is impossible to conceive of a discursive framework that does not include an active interest in what is going on in the majority of the world. The realities of the Middle East, South America, Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and Central, South, and East Asia affect profoundly what happens in Europe and North America. The networks of global finance and trade or even of distributed production that characterize the world economy today would not exist as they do without the Internet. Similarly, the global production and dissemination of news is deeply tied into the substance of everyday politics. It is impossible to separate domestic politics in any major Asian or European country from, say, what is happening in Iraq today. To say this is to state the obvious.

But what is obvious in a discussion of the economy, the media, or politics is somehow seen as novel or esoteric in the realm of culture. This prevailing surprise about the fact that the “contemporary” is also “trans-territorial,” that “now” is “elsewhere” as much as it is “here,” as “strange” as it is “familiar,” is one of the symptoms of the lag in the levels of informed discussion between the domains of culture and of political economy. However, while it may still be possible for some to argue, from a perspective that privileges the present state of affairs, that a globalization of contemporary culture may imply an attempt to impose a specifically Western modernist agenda on a global scale due to the inequalities in articulative capacity, it would be impossible

to sustain this argument in the long term. The momentum generated by different processes of cultural articulation set in motion in various local contexts all over the world indicate a reality of densely networked yet autonomous tendencies, movements, genres, styles, and affinities that are far more complex than those for which the discourse of westernization allows. Even a cursory glance at the crosscurrents of influence in global popular culture, in music, film, cuisine, fashion, literature, gaming, and comics, reveals the inner workings of this web. We are in a world where cinema from Mumbai, manga from Tokyo, music from Dakar, literature from Bogotá, cuisine from Guangzhou, fashion from Rio de Janeiro, and games from Seoul act as significant global presences, rivaling, occasionally overshadowing, the spread and influence of their European and North American analogues. The trends in contemporary art practice and exhibition can, in the end, only be an echo of this banal generality of the everyday life of global cultural traffic and transaction.

The growing presence of art practitioners and works from outside Europe and North America within major European and North American exhibitions, and the realization that there are non-Western histories of modernity have had two ancillary effects. They have demonstrated that these practices, practitioners, and their histories have a significant global perspective, speaking to the world from their own vantage points, as they have done for a while. These two realities also have created pressure within non-Western spaces and by non-Western practitioners, curators, and theorists to lay claim to a global cultural space through the founding of contemporary art institutions, networks of practitioners, and exhibition circuits. One implication of this has been the proliferation of biennials and other international exhibitions of contemporary art in spaces outside Europe and North America and a corresponding increase in the discourse generated through and around contemporary art in these areas.

Another implication of this has been the nascent presence of the curator and the critic of contemporary art in Asia, Africa, and Latin America or who finds him- or herself located within or at a tangent to new Asian, African, and Latin American diasporas in Europe and North America. At first, this new curator may be someone who seems to speak only to and for his or her place

of origin. He or she then may be perceived as working with other curators and artists within specific regional (but transnational) settings or with peers in similar contexts elsewhere in the world. Eventually, he or she will be seen as laying a claim to working with artists from everywhere, including Europe and North America. These claims, as and when they occur (and some are indeed occurring even now), will be based not on the operation of affiliations based on geo-politics, geography, and location, but on elective affinities of interest, taste, curiosities, methodologies, and concerns. This will coincide with the rise of institutional and non-institutional structures, spaces, and networks in contemporary art that have significant presences outside Europe and North America. These entities will become forums for discussion and exhibition as well as fulcrums that enable the leveraging of transregional contexts for collaboration and curating. The idea that contemporary art has to have a central location, privileging a particular history or cultural framework, will erode and give way to the idea that contemporaneity is best expressed within the logic of a flexible and agile network that responds to emergences and tendencies on a global scale. This means that the logic of spatial and cultural distance that operated as a perennial handicap for the non-Western curator, practitioner, or theorist is unlikely to remain of much significance. Likewise, the European or North American artistic practitioner or curator increasingly will be called upon to demonstrate his or her relevance in a multipolar world where European or North American origins or location will no longer operate as an automatic set of credentials. In a world that grows more used to being networked, curators and artists from different spaces will work together and in each other's spaces, as a matter of course. In their everyday practices, they will question, challenge, and subvert stable identifications of spatiality and cultural affiliation. This will not necessarily mean better or worse art or discourse; what it will mean is that the terms "global" and "contemporary" will resonate in a host of different ways, so as to indicate the active presences of hitherto absent, silent, or muted voices and expressions.

The formulation regarding the challenge to the notion of bounded authorship as a result of the expansion of a global platform like the Internet is perhaps of deeper significance for contemporary art, even if it is at the moment less visible. The Internet has set in motion peer-to-peer networks

and online communities that do more than share cultural intelligence: They also occasionally collaborate on the making of things and of meaning, often on a global scale, in a way that is at variance with mainstream protocols of intellectual property. This is most clearly visible in the global open-source communities, but the influence of the “open-source” idea has ramifications beyond software. This tendency is increasingly audible in the domain of a new global musical sensibility based on file sharing, remixing, and recycling of extant musical material, with scant regard to the admonitions either of the protectors of intellectual property or cultural purity. It is also present in peer-to-peer networks founded by scientists, legal scholars, philosophers, historians, and other social scientists who have used the internet to establish a new intellectual common that gains strength through regular usage, participation, and contribution, often in direct opposition to the hierarchies prevalent in institutionalized academic and intellectual life. These new communities of research and reflection are rapidly establishing today’s bridgeheads of inquiry, freed from the inherent conservatism founded on concerns for proprietary or commodifiable utility that ties production in academic institutions and research spaces to “safe” areas of inquiry through the instruments of intellectual property. Increasingly, these “open” spaces are the ones where science, philosophy, social theory are “hot,” more responsive to the world around them.

By foregrounding an emphasis on the commons and other forms of collaboration or non-property or anti-property arrangements, open-source practitioners and theorists (be they in software, music, science, or the humanities) have initiated a profound turbulence in cultural economy. The domain of contemporary art cannot remain immune to this turbulence, which exists all around it. It is perhaps only a matter of time before the ethic of sharing, collaboration, and “commoning” becomes commonplace within contemporary art, just as it has in other domains of culture. It is already visible, in a nascent sense, in numerous curatorial collaborations and artist-practitioner-technician-curator-theorist networks that transcend borders and disciplinary boundaries, that give new twists to the “publicness” of public art projects, and that raise vexing questions concerning the “ownership” of the ephemeral and networked creations and processes that they generate. The increasingly dense cross-referential nature of practices within contemporary

art are also pointers in this direction, leading us to think of the space of contemporary art not as a terrain marked by distinct objects, but as one striated by works that flow in and out of each other or cohabit a semantic territory in layers of varying opacity. Crucially, a liberality of interpretation about what constitutes intellectual property and what devolves to the public domain will be central to defending the freedom of expression in art. Art grows in dialogue, and if intellectual property acts as a barrier to the dialogue between works, then it will meet with serious challenges that arise from the practice of artists and curators.

All this cannot happen without conflict and disruption. The domain of the sign is the playing field of a new cultural economy where the generation of value hinges on an adherence to the principles of intellectual property. Practices that are at variance with the principles of property in culture for a variety of ethical, social, intellectual, aesthetic, and pragmatic reasons increasingly, however, have perforated this domain. The likely consequence of all this is that the tasteful tranquility that marked the enterprise of aesthetic contemplation will find itself besieged by disputations, legal suits, accusations of copyright infringement, and intense, invasive scrutiny by owners of intellectual property. Making art will increasingly be about forging new legal concepts and creating new economies of usage, ownership, and participation. Making and exhibiting art will be fashioning politics, practicing a new economics, and setting precedents or challenges in law.

The existence of contemporary art is ultimately predicated on the conditions of life of its practitioners. The myriad daily acts of practicing, reading, inscribing, interpreting, and repurposing the substance of culture, across cultures, constitute these conditions of life. These acts, in millions of incremental ways, transpose the “work” of art to a register where boundedness, location, and property rest uneasily. The work of art, the practitioner, the curator, the viewer, and the acts of making, exhibiting, and viewing all stand to be transformed. All that is familiar becomes strange; all that is strange becomes familiar.