

Journal of Art for Life

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 6

3-4-2014

Fragments of what? Postmodernism, Hybridity and Collage

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Introduction

Postmodernists have privileged the socially constructed nature of identity that underpins postmodern theory to challenge modernist concepts of identity based on notions of fixed cultural essences. They have also deployed hybridity (outcome of mixture of types or species) and bricolage/collage (recombined disparately appropriated elements) as key strategies against ethnocentrism (Kapchan & Strong, 1999; Young, 1995). While these arguments have done much to undermine centrist biases that privilege cultural hegemony on the basis of abstract or “false universals” (Fox, 1987, p. 1), subtle forms of ethnocentrism persists in art and cultural discourse, indicating an unresolved anxiety about the integrity and instability of identity. Several scholars (Gilroy, 1993; Chakrabarty, 2002; Mitter, 2008; Shin, 2010 among them) have drawn attention to the asymmetries and inequalities that such centrist continues to underwrite.

Because the concepts of hybridity and collage/ assemblage open windows on ideas of culture and being as dynamic rather than static, they constitute pertinent focal points for illuminating the complexity and unstable nature of culture and identity. I propose to reconceive the concepts of hybridity and collage, based on insights from critical realism (Bhaskar, 2010, Archer, 2000) and Indian philosophy (Ramanujan, 1989), and from this vantage point interrogate the subtle persistence of ethnocentrism in art education especially in higher levels of art education discourse.

Hybrid refers to mixing species; it entered scientific vocabulary in 19th century biology and botany. In 19th century ethnology it acquired the racial anxieties that characterize it (Young, 1995). Bhabha (1994) is perhaps most responsible for making hybridity a key term in cultural discourse. Hybridity is conceptually related to syncretism (Kapchan & Strong, 1999; Young, 1995). According to Kapchan and Strong (1999) the term syncretism originated with Melville

Herskovits to analyze new world cultural forms such as Vodoun. “The overall effect of Herskovits's theory,” they state, “is to highlight adaptation, assimilation, and the reconciliation of cultures, rather than their plural coexistence” (p. 240). Syncretism attempts to account for identity’s emergent integrity and coherence as opposed to its heterogeneous origins. As a concept of cultural process it tends to mute the political struggles involved identity creation. As such syncretism does not problematize the political/nationalist claims of cultural purity and exclusionary boundaries in the way hybridity does, which is what makes the latter is a sign of transgression/transformation.

On the other hand collage/assemblage, emerged as an art practice in the early 20th century. It is unmistakably artificial: a practice of reemergence from ruins/fragments, yet as art, the apogee of culture. My argument will counter-pose the biological and social determination of hybridity and self-determination implicit in collage/assemblage, will be counter-posed respectively against what Margaret Archer (2000) called “Modernity’s Man,” and “Society’s Being.” In the term Modernity’s Man Archer implied a critique of both modernism’s masculine and rational biases. In Society’ Being she implied a critique of postmodernism’s emphasis on the constructed fragmented nature of identity (pp. 3-4). The terms also point to two dominant explanations in social theory, one (Modernity’s Man) that traces the complexities of society back to individual actions, and the other (Society’s Being, postmodernism’s view) regards the individual person to be socially constructed. The latter tends to elide the concept of self with the sense of self, and sees us as

. . . purely cultural artefacts [which] is to neglect the vital significance of our embodied practice in the world. This is crucial because it is these practices which are held . . . to be the non-linguistic source of the sense of self. (Archer, 2000, p. 4)

Disparity between postmodern discourse (its stated interest in cultural plurality) and practice (persistent ethnocentrism) is evidence of continuing anxiety over hybridity and identity's integrity. In what follows I will expose this anxiety as integral to the persistence of ethnocentrism, trace its genealogy, and propose solutions to its tensions using the dialectic of hybridity and collage/assemblage.

Discrepancy, Saying and Doing

Partha Mitter (2008) lamented the fact that a recent text, *Art Since 1900: Modernism Antimodernism Postmodernism* (Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh, Joselit, 2004), purporting to be global in perspective, marginalized non-Western art and suppressed Western modernism's hybridity. Mitter acknowledged the book's importance as a "valuable document to the last century's insider-outsider politics of modernism from the Euro-American perspective" (p. 531). He continued, "I point this out only because the authors in fact distance themselves from the hollow universalism of the colonial period" (p. 531). Nevertheless, Mitter was forced to conclude "the book follows a well-trodden path that equates Western norms with global values, having the unintended consequence of excluding the art of the periphery" (p. 531).

Ryan Shin (2010) observed a similar marginalization of non-Western cultures in visual culture discourse in art education. "My viewpoint and experience as a member of a minority group in this society," Shin stated, "has led me to question whether the current visual culture discourse has perhaps neglected the visual culture of minority ethnic groups" (p. 34). Others, he stated, share his concern, referring to Elkins (2003), who argued "visual culture studies . . . tend to privilege Western visual culture" (p. 34), and Noble (2004) who, Shin stated, "worries that Eurocentric thinking and paradigms dominate the discussion and discourse of visual culture" (p. 34). Inclusion is important to Shin and Mitter. However, of greater concern to them is the

evident failure to recognize the equal agency of non-Western ethnicities as modern and postmodern subjects.

Exclusion of others is not the only concern for Mitter, the crucial issue is the unequal value given to hybrid transgressive art forms of Western and non-Western artists. To illustrate the point Mitter (2008) referred first to the exhibition "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art*, held in New York in 1985 and "the critical interventions surrounding the exhibition" (p. 534). Second, he focused on what he calls "the Picasso manqué syndrome" (p. 534). The latter was illustrated by a critique of Gaganendranath Tagore's¹ Cubistic paintings by W. G. Archer. Archer characterized Gaganendranath's work as "weak as art" and "un-Indian" (Archer cited in Mitter, 2008, p. 535). "Unlike Picasso," Mitter stated, "whose use of African sources did not compromise his integrity as a European artist, Gaganendranath's use of Cubism resulted in the loss of self as an Indian (Mitter 2008, p. 537). For both colonizer and colonized what is at stake is degradation and loss of self-integrity on the one hand, and on the other, continuity, expansion, and radical transformation. In my opinion these are profound sources of anxiety and the reason for the persistence of ethnocentrism.

But was Picasso's integrity as a European artist never compromised by his interaction with African culture? That was what was at risk in the Primitivism show. As the very crux of MOMAism, analytic cubism in particular must be protected from outside influence; thus tribal art is assigned "but a residual role" in it. What, apart from the institutional need to secure an official history, is the motive behind this desired

¹ Gaganendranath Tagore 1867-1938: Modern Bengali artist, painter and cartoonist, Nephew of Rabindranath Tagore. As a painter he explored the Cubist idiom.

supercession[sic]? What but the formation of a cultural identity, incumbent as this is on the simultaneous need and disavowal of the other? (Foster, 1985, p. 56)

The so-called residual role was designated as the Negro period (Barr, 1966). In a cynical reversal of reality, Picasso's manifest failure to understand the collage/assemblage configurational principles embodied in African art objects marked the limit of African contributions to his understanding of their method, and as co-producers of Cubism. By a process of reducing form to fragments Picasso arrived at an important "primitive" realization: the constructed provisional nature of identity and the power of schematic images. Images, when they appear in Analytical Cubism, emerge from the configuration of fragmented tones and tendential lines.

Schematic images stand significantly between two other visual art concepts. First: non-representational examples of Analytical Cubism in my opinion signal the important concept of non-being or absence (see Krauss, 1983). In its Analytical phase Cubism was more an analysis of how images become perceptible, than a question of style. Second is illusionism, which presents images as unproblematic: cat, car, coat, our familiar recognizable world. Western visual art traditions generally presumed that illusionism was necessary to represent reality and ideas (Halliwell, 2002), until Cubism overturned mimeticist assumptions.

It would have been embarrassing, however, to concede that so-called primitive artists effectively comprehended the provisional collage/assemblage nature of identity without the detour through Analytical Cubism. Foster (1985) recognized this embarrassment, and that MOMA's primitivist discourse was elaborated to preserve and elevate the Western process of "abstraction achieved by analytic reduction within the patriarchal line: Manet . . . Cezanne . . . Picasso: of the Western tradition" (p. 58). Ultimately, if Western cultural integrity, continuity,

and hegemony over African art was to be preserved, “transgression without [must be] rendered as dialectic within, the official model of modern art--a multiplicity of breaks reinscribed (by the artist/critic) into a synthetic line of formal innovations--is [thereby] preserved” (Foster, 1985, p. 58). What Foster described is the process by which transgressive illegitimate hybridity is translated into national purity.

On the other hand, an example of how nationalism insinuates itself into the margin’s defense of its integrity is Mitter’s identification of W. G. Archer’s denigration of Gaganendranth Tagore’s work as a threat to modern Indian integrity, and Mitter’s obligation to rebut it. Archer, Mitter stated, “follows Roger Fry’s notion of ‘significant form’ as the antithesis to weak ‘feminine’ anecdotal painting. In addition, the word ‘power’ in the passage expresses his primitivist longing for the ‘masculine’ formalism and virile geometry of Indian tribal art” (p. 537). To counter Archer’s formalism Mitter employed the same strategy as MOMA, appealing to cross-cultural formal affinities and traditional legacies. In so doing he betrayed ambivalence about the power of form, (Western) formalism, and affinity, which remains unresolved in his essay. Mitter (2008) stated,

To take an example pertinent to my argument, the motivation behind the Western Expressionists Franz Marc, Lyonel Feininger, or Georg Grosz and the Indian artist Gaganendranath was analogous: objects could be distorted and fragmented to produce dazzling patterns. Although they shared this formal language, the specific cultural contexts of the Central European artists and Gaganendranath were as different as their artistic aims, not to mention their different artistic agendas. (p. 535-536)

Gaganendranath’s different agenda supposedly explains and indigenizes his Cubism. However, one could argue that, even given their contextual differences, all four artists show an

imperfect grasp of Analytical Cubist principles, or/and comparatively less effective use of Cubist principles, or the aspects borrowed from Cubism. Such a diagnosis is consistent with Mitter's observation that "the Indian artist [Gaganendranath] epitomizes the decontextualizing tendency of the age, shared as much by artists in the center as in the periphery: styles past and present could be appropriated to generate strikingly new meanings" (pp. 536-537).

Helped by content-form confusion, Mitter's nationalist anxiety, in the guise of contextual continuity, insinuates itself into a global transnational dialogue to block what could be sound diagnoses of a work's internal constitution. Mitter's (2008) observation below therefore applies to Archer as much as to Gaganendranath.

The overwhelming reason for Archer's dismissive evaluation of Gaganendranath's "Cubist" works lay in the Indian painter's use of the visual language of a culture to which he did not belong. In other words, Gaganendranath suffered a loss of self in becoming a colonial hybrid. (P. 537)

Just as Gaganendranath's non-native incomprehension of a supposedly foreign visual language makes his hybridity deficient and degrading, Archer's inadequate hybridity, his ostensibly insufficient comprehension of Indian art traditions, similarly renders him a flawed non-native critic.

How does nationalism insinuate itself into theory and practice of art history and criticism? Our biases are partly responsible, but the form/structure of theoretical practice can predispose interpretations towards nationalism. In postmodernism content is poured into form from socio-cultural context, a consequence of postmodernism's social constructivist view. Though postmodern contextualism is polarized against modernist formalism, they are symptomatic of a deep dualism that afflicts Western aesthetics. By contrast so-called primitive

animists/pantheists assume forms are alive with or embody life content (see Mitchell, 2013; Pinney, 2001).² When did modern society develop this content/form split and translation from fetish/icon to fine art?

The Fine Art Fetish/Icon Divorce

The Cubist encounter in some sense recapitulates an older encounter of Africans, Europeans, and so-called Orientals (Semites). But the hybridity resulting from this ancient encounter was intolerable to 19th and 20th century European imperialism, because historical evidence could imply Egyptians and Phoenicians had colonized Ancient Greece (Bernal, 1987). By the early 20th century modern Aryanism had turned ancient Afro-Egyptians into so-called Orientals: the intent being to distance black Africans from civilization (Diop, 1955/1974; Bernal, 1987). Cubism revisited unresolved issues of this ancient encounter, about images/objects as (a) living agents—the primitivist/animist-pantheist fetish/icon view; (b) idols—the iconoclastic-aniconic view, which denies any innate intelligence or power to objects; (c) the Western mimeticist aesthetic view distinguishing representational-expressive art-objects from (d) non-representational non-art functional objects (see Halliwell, 2002; Tatarkiewicz, 1980).³

A central objective of E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (2000) is to credit the ancient Greeks with the invention of art as “we” (i.e. Europeans) know it, and to mark the critical break

² These are two authors, among many, who revisit the notion that objects are alive.

³ Halliwell (p. 7-9) disputes Paul Kristeller's thesis that the fine art distinction is an 18th century invention. Halliwell persuasively argues that the distinction between the 'representational' or fine arts and the functional arts/crafts goes back to classical Greece, and was an enduring part of mimeticism. Tatarkiewicz's (p. 276) earlier text supports Halliwell's position. Also, functional objects are 'non-representational' but for the fact of recognition and labeling, which makes them deceptively familiar and prosaically everyday, otherwise they would be regarded as 'abstract,' 'non-representation,' and 'art.'

from Afro Oriental-Egyptian pre-art. “It may sound paradoxical to say that the Greeks invented art,” Gombrich stated, “but from this point of view, it is a sober statement of fact” (p.141). Here Gombrich’s Eurocentrism, his hidden anxiety about Western traditions’ hybridity, asserts itself to make sure illusionism and art were invented by Europeans, culturally advancing beyond ‘Orientals’ and Afro Egyptians. According to Gombrich the latter were trapped in ‘pre-art’ conventions of representation that the classical Greeks overcame by inventing illusionism. Picture making in the ancient Egyptian context had an affinity to picture writing, which, according to Gombrich, inclined Egyptian pre-artists to rely on schematic formulas to represent things. By contrast, the classical Greeks quickly achieved illusionism and art by inventing the process of matching traditional schema to observed objective reality, thereby transforming the pre-art practice of merely reproducing conventions into the art practice of constantly revising and improving representational schema to accurately match objective reality. The catalyst for this Greek revolution occurred “when classical sculptors and painters discovered the character of Greek narration,” which “set up a chain reaction which transformed the methods of representing the human body—and indeed more than that” (Gombrich 2000, p. 129). The “more than that” being inventing/liberating art from Afro Oriental Egyptian pre-art, transforming the latter into the problem solving activity, that is “art” (Gombrich, 2000, p. 141).

Gombrich’s subtle analysis is driven by his conviction that Western and Oriental civilizations are different and unequally developed.

Perhaps it was not only as the maker of “substitute heads” and other dwellings for the “ka” that the Egyptian sculptor could lay claim to the appellation of “one who keeps alive.” His images weave a spell to enforce eternity. Not our idea of eternity, to be sure,

which stretches backward and forward in an infinite extension, but rather the ancient conception of recurrent time. (Gombrich, 2000, p. 125)

Gombrich conjured African-Egyptian culture into pre-art, pre-science and pre-aesthetic states through allusions to magic and his own magical word “perhaps.”

Göran Sörbom (1994) proposed that the source of the Greek art revolution lay in the difference between new Greek and old Egyptian conceptions of the soul, body and life. Sörbom developed his theory based on reservations Gombrich expressed about his emphasis on narrative and pictorial art as the catalysts of the revolution. Gombrich felt he might have underestimated the impact of the lifelike quality of figure sculpture. Using this hint Sörbom (1994) pivoted his explanation around the change in the concept of psyche/soul.

It is not until the fifth century that we find the words “*psyché*” (soul) and “*sóma*” (body) coupled together. Actually in Homeric Greek “*sóma*” always meant “corpse,” i.e. dead body. The word “*psyche*,” which for the archaic Greeks connoted the free soul, came in the classical period to connote the soul as a unitary whole. A number of organs and functions of the additive sum understood as a human being in the archaic period, were put together in the classical period into one thing called “*psyche*” In this way eschatological, physical, and psychological functions were moulded into a unit which in turn was coupled to the human body. But it was not only so, that the word “*psyché*” was used to denote a given sum of functions. These functions were seen as having a certain necessary relation to one another and to the body. (Sörbom, 1994, pp. 73-74)

Sörbom’s thesis implies that illusionism matches a new organic concept of reality. Just as in this new relationship the body is dead without the soul and life simply ceases, so too form without content is dead, and without form content cannot exist.

In contrast, Egyptians, and archaic Greeks, conceived the body “as a composite sum of parts” (Sörbom, 1994, p. 70). The Egyptian concept of the body/objects is echoed in the principles of hieroglyphic writing, which similarly regard parts as wholes and vice versa. Hieroglyphic process combines disparate pictographic part/wholes together to make new wholes, new meanings; indeed, by another mechanical act—adding sound values—to spell words. “Something similar can be seen in Egyptian love poems,” Sörbom stated, “the beloved is praised for one part lovelier than the other, the result is a sum total of lovely parts” (p. 70). Sörbom’s implication that Egyptians’ aggregative aesthetics is primitive would be true, but for the fact that metonymy and metaphor involve a dialectic of sameness and difference, being/not-being, that translates the literal to the conceptual, which, when aggregated and syncopated, yields the exponential insight-full aesthetic experience, as Shakespeare well knew.

STEPHANO

This is some monster of the isle with four legs, who
 hath got, as I take it, an ague. Where the devil
 should he learn our language?

(The tempest, Act 2 Scene 2)

Four legs might be two men or an animal; it might even imply man-squared or square rooted. Given that in *The Tempest* the monster is Trinculo *and* Caliban, simultaneously friend *and* foe, self *and* other, the hybrid image might even imply duplicity; but whose, Prospero’s? To regard Afro-Oriental additive process as archaic and primitive is to misunderstand and disavow the Western past, its inside and outside, as alien and inferior to the new Greco-Western self. There were undoubtedly problems in ancient Egypt’s legacy, but the legacy of mimetic aesthetics and

art is equally problematic, if not more. The civilized/primitive dichotomy works within an illusion that Prospero, or Western civilization, is not and never was Caliban, a bad savage hybrid.

Gombrich (2000) traced the expressiveness that emerged in Greek art to Egyptian models. He specifically connects a vase painting depicting Heracles slaying Busiris and his followers to “Egyptian renderings of some victorious campaign” (p. 135). A photograph of a relief of Seti I attacking a town of Canaan exemplifies the Egyptian model (p. 135). Gombrich and Sörbom’s theories, though insightful, confuse issues of aesthetic choice with issues of aesthetic development. Nevertheless, we can appreciate illusionism as a Greek revolution with global significance, recognizing the shifting contextual nature of the latter.

The new expressive organic concept of body and soul, combined with older Pythagorean concepts of beauty based on ideal proportions, flourished under the new mimetic aesthetics and art. They would remain in place in Mediterranean European cultures until Christian traditions, deeply ambivalent about images, displaced the Greek/representational tradition (Belting, 1994). The schematic and iconic mode of visual culture that prevailed, effectively Christendom’s cult of saints, was an uneasy compromise between iconolatry and iconoclasm, negotiated by Scholastic theology (Belting, 1994). Following several hundred years of this pattern in Medieval Europe, the Renaissance propelled art toward artist-expressive freedom, and propelled the revived concept of expressive freedom toward global domination via enlightened colonialism, but not before the Reformation had pushed art from the religious deeper into the secular sphere. “The image,” stated Belting (1994),

. . . henceforth produced according to the rules of art and deciphered in terms of them, presents itself to the beholder as an object of reflection [not worship]. Form and content renounce their unmediated meanings in favor of the mediated meanings of aesthetic

experience and concealed argumentation The interplay of perception and interpretation that is pursued in the visual arts, as in literature, demands the expert or connoisseur, someone who knows the rules of the game. (p. 16)

Rules, Universality, Form, Content

What rules and whose game it is are central questions of postmodernism. In that context, to ask where is art's freedom if mediation simply shifts from sacred to secular authorities, from authorized icons, to authorized artists and their ideas, opens the game beyond its European provenance: or, put another way, it makes the provincial/fragment status of the Western art concept self-evident. The Western paradigm's asymmetries become self-evident: more males than females represented; few artists-of-color; no functional objects; identical objects packaged as precious or plebian. Belting (2003), however, is uncomfortable with expansion of the Western art historical paradigm. He recognizes that "the archive [the original—Western—art history] cannot absorb everything without fundamental change to its content and significance" (p. 65). But recognition that authority has to be shared and distributed seems to induce either epiphany or trauma. Referring to the *Primitivism Show* Belting (2003) authoritatively stated, "what is true of primitivism was by no means true of the 'primitives' themselves, whom we expected to find outside the boundary of *any* [italics added] art history" (p. 66). In other words, Western art as a fragment of a more global art concept is unthinkable. Once again the anxiety about cultural identity asserts itself.

Like Belting, Arthur Efland (2005) is also anxious about art, though not so much with the expansion of the art archive. Efland's concern is over hierarchy in art and culture: specifically with visual culture theory's "leveling tendency—the belief that there is no pre-established hierarchy that accords privilege standing to certain objects such as 'fine art'" (p. 37). Efland

distinguishes popular culture from fine art, based on their different social purposes. Popular culture works with readily accessible symbolic codes and familiar aesthetic experiences involving pleasure, entertainment, and escape. In contrast, he stated, fine arts

. . . have different purposes and are less accessible [They are] distinguished by a self-conscious attention to their own artistic language. Their claim to function as art derives from a particular concern with the ways these materials are patterned and organized to arouse perceptual attention and thus work as objects of art Many works of fine art originate in other times and places and thus may require knowledge of less familiar contexts for their understanding. (Efland 2004, pp. 244-245)

By Efland's account, visual culture advocates, by an emphasis on demystification, reduce aesthetic experience to the pleasurable mask that subtly manipulative ideology uses to seduce viewers to accept established hierarchies as natural. Efland (2004, 2005), like visual culture theorists and social reconstructionists, accepts institutional theory's concept of "the artworld" (Danto, 1997), and seems prepared to accept a plurality of artworlds (Erickson & Young, 2002). However, he insists hierarchy is important. In his opinion modernist formalism facilitates ideological seduction, but Efland (2004) blames this on a narrowing and misunderstanding of Kantian aesthetics.

The 18th-century concept of disinterestedness provided the foundation for 20th-century formalism, and was mistakenly understood to mean without any interest in the content of the world Modernist formalism gave due consideration only to the objective half of the theory, to the perceptual organization of art. In its disavowal of content as being significant in the study of art, it attempted to free art from its social matrix. What we

need now is a post-formal aesthetic, one that restores content to art while maintaining sufficient autonomy to give play to the imagination. (Efland, 2004, p. 248)

Efland recommends restoration of content to form with its original Kantian conception of the aesthetic experience and disinterestedness. He relies exclusively on modernist so-called misunderstanding of Kantian aesthetics to dispel notions that artworld hierarchies, and art objects' power, to paraphrase Duncum (2002, p.13), are simply an effect or reflection of social relations.

In the account cited above, Efland assumes that Kantian aesthetics has an unproblematic relation to modernism, colonialism and hybridity. Like Kant, Efland (2004) believes that "while the moral is separate from the aesthetic, the category of the aesthetic can present moral issues evident in cognition in forms accessible to the senses" (p. 248). In Kant's psychological scheme the senses are a lower class faculty unable to grasp abstract concepts. In the rational person, the intelligent feelings of perception are split into empirical (rational) facts and subjective values (emotional qualities, feelings). The latter become associated with aesthetic experience, pleasure, and deception, and the former with ideas, critique and ideology. "Unlike rational judgments," Efland continues, "images help to create a consensus of feeling and moral action leading to the sense of community of individuals who act in freedom, uncoerced by politics" (p. 248). This may be true, but histories of imperialism and postcolonial nationalisms have shown how easy it is to rationalize a community's inhumane social practices. The institutionalized autonomy of the arts, like a sequestered conscience, functions to confirm to that community its illusions of innate goodness and to hide its narcissism. Here fine art is fetish in the derogatory sense. By contrast, animist/pantheist concepts, which allow so-called primitives to regard objects as being alive, offer a way out of the legacies of deep inhibiting dualisms of modernism and postmodernism.

Indeed, such ‘primitive’ attitudes speak to a need to transcend nationalism/ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism.

Toward a Global Vision of Art Practice

I believe that subtle nationalism and cultural myopia remain the main obstacles to a broader transcultural basis for art education. Given the tendencies to disavow hybridity, interdependence and co-origination,⁴ and the deep insecurity about identity, Mitter’s (2008) “Picasso manqué syndrome” (p.537), in which relationships are conceivable only in dominant/subordinate original/copy terms, will continue to subtly inhabit higher art education practice, if not its discourse. To critique and seek a way out of the syndrome Martin Powers (1995) employed the example of Western and Chinese traditions; both of which give high value to the *touch* of the individual artist. To presume these tendencies are the property of one culture from which other instances are derived distorts historical reality. “What this means,” Powers (1995) said, “is that the historical and conceptual parameters of the phenomenon in question cannot be adequately framed within the limits of just one cultural tradition. Rather they must be developed dialectically in comparison with related phenomena in other cultures, when such can be found” (p. 387). This approach works with his model of culture as *discourse*. Its aim is to overcome cultural ego, which skews records in favor of a particular culture.

It frees the historian from the essentialist premises of a term such as ‘belief.’ Unlike beliefs, elements of a discourse need not be intrinsic to any particular person or group,

⁴ Interdependent co-origination, or dependent co-origination is a Buddhist concept or approach to reality. It affirms the interdependence of all life for the emergence of their individual identities (Santina, 2002). Postmodernism shares with it the realization of the constructed interdependent nature of identity.

but may be freely appropriated by competing groups for different ends. (Powers, 1995, p. 385)

“Discourse” is a good model of cultural interaction; it captures the constructed and fluid nature of identity. However, the need to abstract intrinsic personalized *beliefs* into discursive disinterested *elements* problematically treats the cultural art/object/image as a husk in order for transcultural work to be done. In spite of the utility of Powers’s discourse model, its drawbacks are exclusion of subjective emotional investment in cultural forms and retention of content/form dualism, which diminishes the intrinsic power of things.

A source of the devitalizing duality in postmodernism is the semiotic confusion of visual indexes/art-objects with the arbitrariness of verbal signs, and/or their reduction to cultural symbolism. The semiotic confusion is evidence of a failure to observe what Bhaskar (2010) calls referential detachment, defined as “the detachment of the act of reference from that to which it refers . . . a condition of any intelligible discourse at all” (p. 257). I will use the quotation below from A. K. Ramanujan’s (1989) insightful essay *Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?* to help unravel the confusion. He states,

One might say, from this [metonymic] point of view, that Hindu ritual (e.g. vedic sacrifice, or coronation; see Inden [1978]) converts *symbols*, arbitrary signs (e.g. sacrificial horse), into *icons* where the signifier (the horse) is like what it signifies (the universe) and finally into *indexes*, where the signifier is *part* of what it signifies: the horse is the universe is Prajapati⁵, so that in sacrificing and partaking of it one is sacrificing and partaking of the universe itself. (p. 50)

⁵ Prajapati: Sanskrit, Lord of creatures, Encyclopedia Britannica.

I would make two changes to Ramanujan's description in order to revise the notion of form back to its pre-classical Greek non-dualistic understandings. First: reverse the order to be in keeping with visual/real experience, starting from the horse as percept-index—part of the universe as the universe; then as icon—something like (and not-like) the universe; and as a vital symbol (among others) of the universe. Second: seen in this order the horse, as symbolic image, is understood as culturally vitally necessary, *not arbitrary*. If it were arbitrary it would have no ritual efficacy as an index, subverting thereby any power it has as an icon and symbol, thereby cancelling all socio-cultural contextual reasons for having it. The horse (art form) is intentionally chosen for qualities it has that make it appropriate for selection as *the* sacrificial object.⁶

Revising rules and rituals

Ramanujan (1989) saw the modern West predominantly as context-free and the East as context-sensitive dialectically related societies. He pointed out that each inhabits the other as subordinate tendencies, and as movements seeking to correct the other's overwhelming power. Thus far their contention within art education has kept hybridity in the margins of theory-practice. Yet socio-cultural transformation is effected through hybrids. The challenge is how to connect the engine of the context-free/context-sensitive dialectic to art education theory-practice.

The first move has been to reconnect Ramanujan's semiotic scheme to its visual/manipulative perceptual and object origins. This brings verbal practice closer to picture writing; i.e. to the hybrid juncture of percept-image and sound-word: to hieroglyphic and ideographic processes that incorporate collage principles.

⁶ See Freedberg, D. *The Power of Images* pp 274-277 for a similar argument. However, Freedberg does not seem to view content/form in the stratified way that I do.

The next step is recognition that a metonymic and metaphoric dialectic, based in fundamentally intelligent-feeling intuitive processes, is situated at the heart of art practice, whether making or consuming. I propose that the aesthetic experience resides in the metonymic and metaphoric dialectic, and that it is in that dialectic that the power and agency of art objects resides. However, true to our fundamentally hybrid constitution and to collage/assemblage principles, all cognitive faculties, including reason, are used to make and make sense of art. Art-objects need to be recognized as complex embodied combinations of materials, skill-techniques, and intelligent-feeling. Content is regarded as subtle forms emergent from material art forms in their interaction with contexts. No level of form/content is reducible to any other; and because all levels are constituted of “co-presence” (Bhaskar, 2012, p. 215) or combined absence-and-presence, no level of being is reducible to its social meanings. In this framework both context-sensitivity and context-freedom (to affect different contexts) are distinguished and sustained, and in this context transcultural transaction can be accomplished.

Because art objects, as index-icon-symbols are *not-the-only* one of their kind, dialectical comparisons, as Powers (1995) proposed, can affect meaningful cross-cultural or cross-context connections, thereby making and expanding community. Through a collage/assemblage hybrid centered model, it is possible to achieve sensitivity to the vital investments people make in cultural objects and connect to the latter’s global resonance. Cultural transactions or intercourse can be situated in a framework of interdependent co-origination that respects and makes sense of transgressive hybrid persons/moments. The dialectics of hybridity and collage/assemblage, of the context-sensitive and context-free social tendencies, can help transcend the anthropocentric and subtle nationalistic tendencies in modernism and postmodernism. The last thing art needs is

a return to narrow closed concepts of art and culture, mediated by super technology and a humanity whose art practice distances its inhumanities.

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