

NETWORKED:

Dialogue & Exchange in the Global Art Ecology
Triangle Network Conference
26 & 27 November 2011

The necessary instability of hybrid cultures

New Silk Roads: repositioning the role of art activists in Asia at the end of the 1990's and the birth of Arthub.

Text by Davide Quadrio

The source of my fascination with the instability of crossing/mixing cultures is a long story. It is not the case that my connection to China came from a very different background than contemporary art and has been incredibly related to the complicated geography that connected the western world (Europe) and the Far East. My first contact with the 'other' was with Gandhara art, the fusion of Hellenic and Indian artistic aesthetics; from there my curiosity brought me to Indian, Tibetan and Sino-Tibetan histories of architecture. These complicated cultural environments still remain an area of interest for me and are embedded in my personal and professional life; BizArt and consequentially Arthub are the final products of it.

I cannot avoid feeling part of an historically constructed and highly symbolic concept of the Silk Road, the place where communication between West and East (as the extremes of this fertile cultural area) created what can be defined as the exotic 'other', the 'other' that cannot be understood, the 'other' that fascinates but does not and cannot represent 'you'. This concept of the 'other' is the foundation of one of the most dangerous equations: the concept of the exoticised 'other' vis-à-vis national and ethnical identity.

Recently I found a very eloquent and precise description of this 'problematic' matter. In a single sentence Susan Withfield resolves the problem of otherness and identity in an extremely simple way in the catalogue for 'The Silk Road: trade, travel, war and faith'. She states:

"The exotic is used to describe something outside our everyday experience so that we find ourselves with a want of more informative adjectives. The danger comes if we accept our initial ignorance and the exotic becomes the different, outside any possible experience. This nascent 'orientalism' was not confined to Europe; the empire at the other end of the Silk Road, China, has been just as prone to describe its neighbours (Western to them) as exotic and fundamentally different from the Chinese – as the 'other'".

So, here we are, a century later with the arguably similar issues of identity as difference and difference as exotic. My personal experience of working in contemporary art in China and, to some extent Asia, is a valid example of this identity/difference/exotic association.

Let's explore 'post-communist' China and its relationship with greater Asia (East Asia and South East Asia) as a concrete case study.

In a recent conversation with Yu Ouyang, a poet and scholar residing in Australia, we discussed the problem of the legitimacy of being a foreigner in China and being able to have a critical discourse about contemporary art in China, which has been at the core of our ongoing conversation. Somehow, the problem of reducing the debate on art in China and Chinese art to legitimate the circle of 'eligible' thinkers ('you can comment on China, you cannot comment on China') is something that I cannot agree upon but is such a common refrain among the general attitude of many critics and scholars in China.

Despite the fact that, through the work of BizArt and Arthub, I have tried to reduce or limit the antagonism of what China/Asia and the West/America (as the epitome of Western civilization in modern times) can represent per se, I felt, and feel, that there is still much to achieve in the normalization of the 'other' beyond post-colonialist discourses. For this reason I strongly believe that we all need to attempt to see what lies beyond the simple duality of East/West and to see the picture that the Asian artistic community (together with the Chinese Diaspora) can offer as a tool to analyse the current situation in China/Asia and why the representation of contemporary art in China/Asia is already based on a physiognomy of a nationalistic/ethnocentric attitude.

A new mapping of critical discourses is needed that will contribute to the development of a more constructive economy around the practice, criticism and eventually the market of contemporary Chinese art and, by extension, Asian art.

The activists

This long introduction was necessary to position myself and what I stand for. It is a necessary framework to put the following chapters in a broader context.

As in the past, the passage of people between countries and continents continues; the booming economy of Asia attracts people to come or return to Asia (after decades of an Asian Diaspora). In the art world, the foundation for the last two decades of Asian artistic developments lies in the fact that Asia was, and partly still is, a new territory to explore and to develop hybrid artistic experiences. This hybridism is not a problem per se, nor is it a recent phenomenon. What is new is the speed of the development, the international, global access via digital/internet technologies and the immediate contact with the market. This variegated community of native Asians, ethnic Asian returnees and foreigners created, and persists as, a much diversified background in the arts resulting in a very lively arts movement throughout the 1990's.

This mostly independent community, shaped around civil societies' experiences, has been an incredible engine for many years, fighting between independence and freedom of speech and actions/activism, between financial instability and cutting edge ideas. What organizations like ANA, IAN and local organizations in a pan-Asian movement have achieved in the space of few years stands at the forefront of a specifically Asian situation and is responsible for the new Asian artistic wave.

Reading between the lines

Reading the magazine Art Asia Pacific, one thing strikes me: all adverts, bar Asia Art Archives', are from galleries or international institutions advertising artists, exhibitions and auctions. Even though we can say that most art magazines reflect this trend (after all, galleries have the money to pay for ads!), in the case of AAP it strikes me that the content of the advertising is far removed from the content of the magazine's articles. The magazine shows this duality of conceptual content and superficial content. It seems that the current situation in Asia and the presentation of Asia to the world is codified in this sort of 'international normalization' of Asia's representations: galleries/artistic products. The truth, as always, is far more complicated. It seems though that

complications are not well received by audiences, peers and founding bodies. It seems that a flattened simplicity described as 'accessibility' predominates.

In relation to Asian contemporary art, this accessibility is represented by a simple categorization that can be directly read worldwide (via accessible symbolism and representations) and is directly sellable. This phenomenon has only taken place in very recent years and the hyperbolic sale results arising in mainland China just before the current financial crisis were a direct result of the inflated art market worldwide.

With this kind of development, the role and the importance of independent grass roots organizations has been partly lost or normalized, again by simplistic analysis of recent history. The lack of consultable data (most of the independent initiatives did not have the recourse to systematize their archives), and a sort of 'inaccuracy' by researchers and curators in collecting information, contributed to the making of information about the origin of contemporary art developments in the 1990's blurred, uncertain and very often easily mis-categorized.

Case and chances: the late 1990's and Hong Kong as the gateway for communication

At the end of the 1990's Asia was a very different world.

In my personal experience the In-Between conference in 2001, organized by IA Space in Hong Kong, was of extreme importance in achieving a more pan-Asian vision of the arts. It revealed to me the importance of the role of civil societies: activism and sustainability. It was also the perfect forum for sharing information, frustrations, desires and projects with an extensive group of organizations and, most importantly, individuals.

Independent artistic organizations in Asia have a very short history and a very fragile structure. Very few of them have public money to support structures and projects; the lucky ones are located in very specific countries or regions in Asia: Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Despite this, they grew in a very energetic environment and were, and are, able to accelerate the artistic content and the process to realize this environment in exceptional ways. For me, ten years in Shanghai and BizArt was a life-long experience, a condensed time and space that is difficult to describe to anyone who did not share the experience. It was, indeed, something unprecedented.

All this happened together with the giant that is China opening up at an incredible pace. The country that had been silent for four decades became the driving force for the worldwide economy in only a few years. Everybody wanted to be a part of it, and governments worldwide were interested in getting into bed with China. Art and culture were the most natural and easiest ways to approach China and to try to better understand how to access this relatively 'unknown' (the exotic 'other') political, economic and cultural entity.

The Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) created ASEM for this very purpose. European governments put in place and invested in ambitious cultural programmes (such as the Year of China in France and the Year of France in China). Anxieties over linking with China progressed with the advent of the Olympic Games in Beijing last year and the forthcoming Shanghai Expo in 2010. From underground events to international festivals, symposia and exhibitions, artistic productions and architectural landmarks, and university-to-university programmes, China became the new undiscovered territory. The desire for internationalization, the lack of a progressive development of cultural frameworks and the inadequacy of existing infrastructures have pushed China (and to an extent other Asian countries as well) to adapt quickly via a sort of copycat infrastructure and content. With this sort of acceleration and urgency, China has been forced to adapt to the situation and has been pushed into learning on the job, with the consequential problems ensuing.

Throughout this process the lack of support for civil society projects from the Chinese and many other Asian governments, and the structural unavailability and inaccessibility of funds for small/un-decoded/grassroots organizations from international funding bodies like UNESCO, left independent organizations in the background. Many self-supported organizations in China and Asia had to have a very strong business element (either offering services or selling artworks) and this requirement for the people working in these organizations to be multi-disciplinary quickly exhausted resources and energy.

In recent years (until 2006), meetings between autonomous centres happened once or twice a year, with raising money to do so an ongoing struggle. The last one I participated in was organized by SSamzie in Seoul and led to the creation of the Intra Asia Network (IAN). This meeting also ended a very vital period of communication between art initiatives – a year and a half later SSamzie closed down.

After that the market bubble that had already been lingering for a couple of years expanded; artists' works from China and quickly thereafter from all over Asia entered the market with unprecedented sales. Galleries and auction houses were racing to get hold of works and this era of speculation escalated for a couple of years up until the recent financial crash.

Organizations like the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, so important for the support of artistic projects and initiatives in Asia, began to change direction. This change brought with it many resources fundamental to the in-depth support of artistic work in Asia, based more on process and research than artistic products.

Arthub Asia and cultural investments

While all of this was happening, Arthub was created in response to a very clear need to support creativity and its quality in Asia. The crucial co-operation with the Prince Claus Fund, one of the few remaining organizations that believe in the work of creative networks, created the basis for a long-term strategy of micro financing.

After ten years of networking in Asia and the rest of the world through BizArt in Shanghai, Arthub was born as an extension of BizArt's China based project and as an ideal structure to support intra-Asia communication in order to boost an intellectual infrastructure that is the fundamental base for any artistic production.

Conclusions

Art needs to be empowered by the people who genuinely want to create communities of ideas and innovation.

The lack of a no-strings-attached 'investment' (either private or public) for sustaining the arts in Asian countries at a level of civil society is an enormous obstacle in the development of an innovative artistic environment, together with a strong re-positioning of the role of contemporary art in the region.

In this period of economic crises that shows finally the fragility of the so called global economy, Asia is at the forefront of a chance for repositioning its role and vision of the future. Creativity and art are, no matter how you want to interpret, a big part of the basis to create an "innovative" idea of the future.

Arthub is a unique example of daring to change and of supporting individuals with great ideas, genuine spirit and a bright vision of the future. No matter how you want to interpret these things, they are what art stands for.

This text appeared on Asia Art Archives in May 2009

Resources:

- 'What is missing? Learning from difficulties and failures: a dialogue between grant makers and beneficiaries', Forum Cultural Mundial, Brazil (video presentation), 2006
- 'New Ways of Engaging Asia - Artists' Mobility and Artist-in-Residencies', Gwangju, Korea, 2006
- 'World Contemporary Art in the Eyes of Asia', 6th Gwangju Biennale, Korea, 2006
- Panelist on the cultural programme, Asia-Asia, Res Artist meeting, Berlin, Germany, 2005
- Soft-power relationship between Asia and Europe at the cultural level, International Conference of Asia Scholars Academy on Sciences, Shanghai, China, 2005
- Diversities in Society: Integration of Civil Societies' Initiatives in Public Policies for Cultural Diversity, ASEM, Creteil, France, 2005
- AIR, Asian Artists in Residencies, artistic mobility and artistic exchange organized by Bamboo Culture International, Taipei Artist Village, Taiwan Artist Village Alliance, July 2005
- Diversities in Society: Integration of Civil Societies' Initiatives in Public Policies for Cultural Diversity, Creteil, France, June 2005
- IIAS, workshop on cultural policies in China, invited as one of the of yYoung leaders in the cultural field in Asia, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, November 2004
- Analyses of cultural development in Shanghai, work-shop organized by World Bank, Shanghai, China, August 2004
- Connecting Civil Societies of Asia & Europe: An Informal Consultation, Barcelona, Spain, June 2004
- In Between conference, International Alternative Space Conference, Globalization and Alternative Spaces, Seoul, Korea, May 2004
- Conference on independent art spaces in Asia, Okinawa, Japan, November 2003
- Participation as a guest lecturer into a conference on contemporary art spaces and public institutions organized by AFAA, Cattle Depot Artists' Village, Hong Kong, November 2001
- In-Between, Iaspace, Hong Kong, 2001