

Transnational Art and the Multicultural City

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Abstract

The modern city provides a platform of transcultural interaction and a stage for a multiplicity of art. This essay is based on the experience and history of the Oslo based office Transnational Arts Production working in this sector. The multiplicity opens up for a hybridisation of artists finding inspiration on a wide horizon and giving their expression its own uniqueness by infusing it with local heritage – and equally how a culturally diverse audience may deal with this expression through unique interpretations. Introduced in the second half of the essay is the issue of how artists re-use city waste to bring new meaning to original objects and new understanding to the sphere of transculturality.

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Introduction

This essay is an adaptation of a paper initially presented at the 9th Urban Cultural Research Forum: *Arts management – City Management: Models for Sustainable City Renewal and Cultural Continuity*, Bangkok, March 2011. The mandate was to present in brief the motivation and work of the Norwegian institution *Transnational Arts Production*, as seen within the scope of the given theme of the forum.

The modern city provides a platform of transcultural interaction and a stage for a multiplicity of art. Its citizens are free to delve into its pleasures and pleasures, making consumer habit part of constructing and re-constructing personal identity. It's a freedom of choice and the goods are increasingly defined by global cultural currency.

In his 2008 essay *States of Mind* on the visual art sector in current New York, Shaheen Merali speaks of the *very lack of precision that makes New York so vital and such a metis and which has earned it the name of a laboratory – the throbbing multitude... in itself regarded as a cultural capital*. This site's specific declaration of love, to one city, could very much stand for any number of large cities around the world that one could think of.

This multiplicity of course has to do with the radical change in mobility we have seen over a lifespan, the exchange of ideas brought on by academia and popular media, the dubious horn of surplus that the internet has turned into and the increasing erasure of the border between the popular culture and what we see as art.

Up for offer in Bangkok, New York, Oslo, Sao Paulo or Dakar is a multitude of global expressions, brought here by artists / curators / agents tapping into the source. This is happening in appropriately assigned rooms, at independent irregular sites or even in the street next to you. The spectator/consumer is an inter-actor translating and interpreting by him or herself – here quoting George Steiner - as a cultural being, *re-enacting by our own educated consciousness, the creation by the artist. We retrace... the coming into form of the poem*. Plainly speaking, the local "me" possesses a unique understanding of what's in front of me. To do so I make use of my cultural heritage to translate and interpret.

Heritage – Singaporean scholar William Lim defines heritage as a counterpoise, a counterpoise to western hegemony. To quote: *(Heritage) is the most effective tool available to serve both as a counterpoise to the ever evolving contemporary world culture and as an effective filter for incorporating changes at its own pace and time*. Lim and his students have developed a school of architecture giving space to cultural roots, incorporating this into a future landscape of ecological buildings.

Within the western classical arts colonial hegemony is still very evident both in practice and curriculum. I'm however optimistic in seeing this dwindle and leave room for a more democratic hybridisation of artists finding inspiration on a much wider horizon and also giving their expression its own uniqueness by infusing it

with local heritage. The local as a unique trait inside a pluralism of expressions to me is a counterbalance to universalism.

I work with a small institution in the relatively small capital of Norway. This is a young nation in its current form spanning 4.9 million people, favourably rich on oil resources and up till the mid 70s quite an homogenous place. Popular media – often citing populist politicians - regularly on the issue of new immigration impose the concept of a Norwegian unique culture under pressure from a multi-headed otherness in the shape of immigration.

In this landscape our institution Transnational Arts Production (TrAP) chooses to work with new international art as an eye-opener, as an enrichment, advocating pluralism as a gift to the mind.

TrAP has a history going back to 1995, then a network initiative bringing together people working with the arts inside international NGOs and people from various art institutions for a joint forum for collaboration. This led to a three week national festival programme and under the banner of *Du store verden!* a long-term strategy to fill the role as a production office inside the transnational dimension within the arts, paying attention particularly to trends, artists and geographical regions the established Norwegian institutions seemed to ignore. This strategy to adapt to what-is-not-there has led to different approaches to different sectors. Overall however is the desire to work with artists of transnational identity, not necessarily based on ethnic or national association, but rather on approach and circumstances.

We wish to provide an alternative. Any sector of the arts has its trends and popular expectations. We try to give visibility to the not so obvious. We work with all genres; visual arts, music, performing arts, literature and film.

The strategy of how to go about doing this would probably be similar to any given city. Finding the optimal room is vital. Either to seek a prestigious location to get some of the instant recognition that this provides, or to groom the alternative nature of the expression and go for anti-establishment alternative spaces, even to bring it out on the street as an intervention within the social space. By looking for the optimal room, not having our own rooms, we work as producers with a number of collaborative partners. The site defined, - we go looking for the audience groups.

Twice we've worked with Yogyakarta visual artist Heri Dono - in two different contexts. Heri Dono has of course a huge international standing, having over the last 15 years been invited to a long list of prestigious galleries and art biennales, - however mostly working the Pacific circuit. For his initial presentation in Oslo in January 2006 the work was mounted by the artist himself in cellblocks of an former police station, then recently transformed into the IKM gallery space. Dono's implicit political statements were given a special resonance by the site.

This was particularly evident in terms of the video installation *Interrogation*, directly addressing the recent political upheavals in Indonesia - figures 1 & 2.



Figures 1 & 2. Heri Dono



Dono of course is a prime example of an artist able to be distinctly local in his expression, bringing heritage - regularly in form of wayang puppetry - into a contemporary context and with it, communicate to an international audience.

Later Dono was invited back with us to be part of a larger sound-art exhibition curated by Selene Wendt for the Stenersen Museum in Oslo. The work *Kala Kali*,

made in collaboration with young Yogya artist Jompet, used recycled material, creating new work from the debris of the modern city - figure 3.



Figure 3. Heri Dono Photo credit: Richard Jeffries

Originally asked to speak at a conference on Arts Management/City Management it stood out as quite appropriate to spend a few minutes with the exciting thought of the role of art as recycling the scattered fragments of the city. Not only is this an obvious way to describe the post-modern reconstruction of shared knowledge, it also has its physical manifestation in contemporary art, - the sign of the times one may insist, in a global reality where our waste is taking mountainous proportions.

Illustrating the essay are images from a two-year touring exhibition we did in collaboration with the Norwegian Association of Art Societies. The exhibition aptly named *Trash Art – Found Objects / Recycling the Looking Glass*, was curated by artist and curator Samir M'kadmi. The exhibition presented the work of nine artists, including Liu Wei's videos of people working the Chinese garbage heaps - figure 4, Bill Morrison's feature length compilation of found nitrate film footage *Decasia*, Jon Gundersen's four office suitcases of neatly assembled found objects from the streets - figures 5 & 6 and Roza Ilgen's sculpture and context installation of human hair - figure 7.

In the 2010 anthology *Restless Cities*, UK scholar Esther Leslie presents an excellent essay on recycling and the city. She quotes Walter Benjamin describing Baudelaire as the original *rag picker and poet* in one and goes on to show how waste as a poetic



Figure 4. Liu Wei

booty has played an increasing role in contemporary art history - spanning the Dadaist movement and finding its boldest recycler in Marcel Duchamp, through his introduction of the *ready made*. This leads Leslie to say: *The charge inherent in found materials, re-contextualised ready-mades, is that they dislodge things from a context once made for them into a space of free play, of unbounded significance, connotation and, thus, re-personalization.*



Figures 5 & 6. Jon Gundersen Photo credit: Marius Wang



In 2009 we did an exhibition on the young artist scene in Vietnam working with new media and installations, curated by Tran Luong, a renowned Vietnamese artist himself during the notorious Gang of Five generation. The exhibition *Lim Dim* presented a generation, which is still fairly invisible within the public sphere of home-country Vietnam and included fifteen artists, among them Hanoi based Nguyen Manh Hung with (ill) - figure 8 a sculpture recreating memories of growing up in an apartment complex in his home town, itself recreated by various scattered and found objects.



Figure 7 above.
Roza Ilgen Photo
credit: Bård Grape

Figure 8 right.
Nguyen Manh
Hung Photo credit:
Sidsel De Jong



The exhibition was shown at the Stenersen Museum in Oslo during the fall of 2009 and then went on to Bergen to the Gallery 3,14. Other works in the exhibition were Le Vu's piece *Double Bed* – covered with moistened instant noodles, bearing the artist's portrait as a signature - figure 10, new video works by artists Nguyen Minh Phuoc and Nguyen Trinh Thi and sculptures by Pham Ngoc Duong here questioning the happiness depicted in the traditional and national symbolic relationship of the crane and the turtle, in his sculptures replacing the crane with a vulture - figure 9.

To communicate this exhibition to the Oslo-Vietnamese Diaspora, we started talking months ahead to the different Vietnamese interest groups in



Oslo, informing them about the process and leading to a special session at the Museum, where the curator and a number of the artists led a walk-through presentation of the exhibition in Vietnamese, opening up for questions and comments.

Audience reach out is a necessary practical part of any art project. TrAP does an annual number of concerts, performing art events, visual art exhibitions and locating the event at the optimal venue usually ensures the expected venue audience, in itself a main target group for an artist or a project of the unexpected. Presenting something of a particular geographical or cultural origin however asks for additional special targeting, knowing you have

Figure 9 above.
Pham Ngoc Duong
Photo credit: Sidsel
De Jong

Figure 10 right.
Le Vu Photo credit:
Sidsel De Jong



something of relevance for an audience who normally won't recognise either the usual information channels or the venue. Our experience is that for this nothing provides merit more than working through minority group opinion leaders. The reward is the rare event of witnessing a specialized audience translating what very often is a hybrid of something for them familiar, still unpredictable and so part of the shared playroom of our changing city.

This very much has turned into a celebration of the new multicultural artist scenes as representing hybridisation, where artists have the freedom to fuse the local with elements of the global landscape. One may speak of it as a privilege for the few, as something characteristic of global new urbanism. For us working in the field still it brings encouragement, through its characteristic of *reverse colonialism*, to borrow a term from Giddens. There is a reckless attitude at play, that freely and deliberately ignores the confinements of western art history, the complete 20th century of modern refinement of the visual arts, the performing arts and classical music these days banished mostly to entertain in the established national art institution halls around the world.

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