



University Gallery

NEO PANGAEA:

An exploration of cultural hybridity



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FONDO DE CULTURA ECONÓMICA



University of Essex



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Preface

The terms and conditions of our time: hybridity, diaspora, cultural translation, osmosis, crossing borders, multilingualism... all these expressions are evoked here to describe the six artists whose work has been brought together in this exhibition. Those words trace the pressure of the real that has been moulded into particular forms of experience, but how do artists represent such experiences? Do such words fully describe them or do we need other kinds of representation to express them adequately? A single term can evoke but cannot stage the complexity of what it describes. It is left to the artists to develop a new language through which they rehearse and articulate the mingled and mangled transactions of our era, signalling through continuous experimentation the range of pain and of satisfaction that such processes can produce.

Artists have always worked at the cusp of what it means to be human. The artists selected here signal the humanity, as well as the inhumanity, of our era.

For what the curators have done here is to articulate the dialectics of the experiences of our time, showing us how hybridity and cultural translation form new identities and take others away, in processes of productivity and loss. The repeated transformations of our time mean that artists are more often reflecting on their own experiences and mutating identities, as in the transformative self-portraits of trying to make meaning of social, political and technological change, than trying to transform our perceptions of the world, to make it new. The problem now is not that perception as gone stale, but that the world itself has been made new and we do not know how to account for what we are perceiving. As capital ebbs and flows in ever wilder tidal waves, there is little knowledge of how its effects affect the lives of ordinary people.

The world is changing too fast for the modernist project to have meaning in our time. Or perhaps Modernism's 'poetics of impersonality' was a different kind of response, seeking refuge in stasis and constancy in the face of the economic and political instability of its own era. Today's artists have moved in

another direction, giving us a poetics and politics of personality.

This trajectory is illustrated in the transformations of the work of Pakistani-born Rasheed Araeen, who has moved from a modernist minimalism to an activist aesthetic, from the formalism of *'Chakras'* (1969-70) to the political charge of *'Paki Bastard'* (1978). In *'Green Painting'* (1985-6) Araeen pulls the two together, articulating in an ironic way the formalism of modernism in a rectangular grid of nine panels, with the presence of cultural politics signalled by the blood-spattered green which fills four of them, and the lines of calligraphy in Urdu script which to the Western eye may look decorative or religious but in fact are made up from lines of articles in newspapers about contemporary political events. The modernist escape from time into the timeless, which continues to mark the work of some contemporary artists such as Anish Kapoor, is here reversed into the time of history, what Walter Benjamin named as *jetzzeit*, the 'now time'. All the works in this exhibition are marked by history, confront rather than try to escape





their own historical moment. Roderick Buchanan's work performs an act of memo- rization, enriching the context of his own productions with personal histories which highlight the complex political history that links Glasgow to Northern Ireland in an entangled network that lives on in our own time in a symptomatic repetition of the past and reminds us that hybridity, as we now understand it, is not merely the product of the forces of late twentieth-century capitalism but better described as a continuing colonial effect, linking colony and metropole under the performative penumbra of the postcolo- nial condition.

While Buchanan's work seeks to heal through forms of understanding, Araeen's work erupts in the face of the scars and scarring that mark our own time. Many of the artists here maintain that activist stance, addressing either the politics of the self and the body first articulated by Frantz Fanon with respect to the lived experience of racism in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), or working through the politics of the self in order to signal and reach out to all those other selves who have

to submit to the same circumstances of difficult adaptation to alien cultures. These processes are wittily evoked by the Lebanese-born artist Adnan Charara in his *'Envelope'* series (2008), where the viewer follows the cartoon head being absorbed into one background followed by another, and then another, and then another, or more disturbingly in the transformative self-portraits of Eduardo Padilha, whose work meditates on the self-conscious manoeuvres of social camouflage that the migrant employs as he or she emerges in part visibility and participates in a new culture through strategies of adaptation, transformation and disguise. In painful contrast to Charara, with Sama Alshaibi, we experience the traumas of expulsion from the artist's own cultures and cultural spaces, above all from Iraq and Palestine. Little can match the extraordinary creativity that has been forged in the cruel crucible of Palestine in late twentieth century art. Like Emily Jacir or Mona Hatoum, Sama Alshaibi articulates the ways in which cultures are not always translated, how many borders operate by an osmosis which allows only particular ethnic

groups to permeate them, with vast concrete barriers erected to keep all others out. *'ID'* (2006), with its ambiguous title of ID as the identity documents which form the kernel of all border crossings, together with the id, the repressed Palestinian state—relegated to the unconscious of the world's conscience— which the vast tomb-like concrete barriers seek to exclude but never prevent from crossing in oneiric forms. ID shows us the artist confronting the barriers and forms of exclusion which have formed both the mate- rial of her life and the productivity of her art, staged here in the act of painting the colossal concrete wall, literally turning politics into art. And this is where this remarkable exhibi- tion keeps us focussed, with the uncomforta- ble fact that the hybridity of our times leaves us as often in a state of failed translation as in its warm and celebrated successes. So, in contrast to Gloria Anzaldúa's optimistic *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* of 1987, Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Bitacore del Cruce* (2005) moves us from Spanish to Spanglish to Esperanto, signalling both possibilities of creativity and of a bleak trans- formation of languages in which translation





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both succeeds and fails in its response to the power struggles between Anglo and Hispanic cultures in the Americas.

Those power struggles continue, but this exhibition, in which these artists politicize aesthetics by exploring the processes of cultural hybridisation, graphically demonstrates something beyond cultural hybridisation as such, and that is that the minority or non-Western artist, and therefore person, is no longer an 'other', that the epistemological division between the West and the rest, constructed so carefully by the political theory and cultural scholarship of the nineteenth century, has in our own time been successfully challenged and dismantled at both the political and cultural level. The exhibition shows that the old division of the peoples and cultures of the world into the human and the scarcely human has been, for the most part, superseded. Where it remains, it cannot last; for walls are built but in their own moment, and all history tell us that walls of exclusion have no power against the boundless levelling sands of art and time.

By Professor Robert Young.
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