

TRANSCULTURAL INTEGRATION

OF CONTEXTS AND PRACTICES INTO A WORKABLE WHOLE: 9TH GWANGJU BIENNALE 2012

Six curators—Mami Kataoka (Tokyo), Sunjung Kim (Seoul), Nancy Adajania (Bombay), Carol Yinghua Lu (Beijing), Wassan Al-Khudhairi (Doha) and Alia Swastika (Jogyakarta)—are in the process of working towards a theme for the 9th *Gwangju Biennale*. Over the last five months, their conversations have alternately reached a threshold of insight and hit an impasse, as is only to be expected in such an experimental situation, and they have now regrouped to find alternative starting points. Their most recent discussion took place at the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha and has continued over email. Here are some excerpts from the discussions, which open themselves to a variety of interpretations. The transparency of their gesture—to expose themselves in an early phase of their deliberations—is integral to their curatorial methodology, which aims to be inclusive, non-linear, and rhizomatic in its possible elaborations.



CAROL YINGHUA LU: I am back in Shanghai. Thank you for brainstorming together in Doha. All I dreamt about last night was our discussion regarding the theme of the 9th *Gwangju Biennale*. Here are some thoughts that I would like to share with all of you. In our failed attempt to establish a common ground in Doha and to come up with a theme so far, I want to suggest "A Round Table" as a potential title to be considered for our biennale. It initially was a suggestion to collect our individual thoughts and piece our statements together in the form of a written roundtable discussion, but I think it can potentially function as a tentative title.

We have spent so much time trying to discover where and how our thoughts could be unified into a whole, that on this journey we seem to have forgotten about our own grounds and what is the most relevant and urgent issue in relation to our respective practices. For instance, over dinner Mami Kataoka talked about her fascination with invisible and mystic powers and how artists manifest this kind of power in their works. It's important to remind ourselves that what has brought us together is not our similarities and common interests, but our individual practices in art and our participation in our respective contexts. Thanks to being in Doha, we have been able to witness Wassan Al-Khudhairi's role in the museum and the role her museum plays in the local context, and her frustrations and challenges. We all have particular areas we are interested in investigating and particular artists whose practice we follow closely. So the way we meet is the form of a round table, not through a common theme. The round table as a reference came from King Arthur's famed table in the Arthurian legend, around which he and his Knights congregate. As its name suggests, it has no head, implying that everyone who sits there has equal status. Accidentally, the last table where we congregated for dinner at the hotel in Doha, was a round table.

On the plane trip back, I saw this great image of a round table congregation in Stanley Kubrick's movie *Dr. Strangelove Or, How I Learnt to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). In this political satire (I didn't see the whole movie and my Google search is not working so I can't offer more content description at this point), the War Room, one of the most memorable of movie interiors, was created by Ken Adam out of a large circular desk and a ring of lights above, where President Muffley convenes with his advisers. Each of them talked on the phone in their own languages while being together physically in the space. Somehow, it aptly reminded us of what we have experienced in Doha. The idea of a round table with its suggestion of equality and democracy also evokes the notion of being together and collectivity and can be a peaceful gesture for resolving differences.

It could be quite nice to start our biennale "A Round table" (if we decide to go ahead with this title) with an introductory section entitled, "Who Are We and Where Do We Sit?" By asking where we sit on the round table of history, allows us to examine the issue of past histories, the idea of recurrence and self-definition, as well as the issue of archives and their new relevance today. Our press statement can also appear in the form of a written round table in which each of our voices, concerns in art and positions can be articulated without being compromised by a collective identity or consensus. Working together is not about surrendering our differences to a common ground but about finding a way to articulate our differences.

WASSAN AL-KHUDHAIRI: I just can't help but ask myself what would the product be, visually, of such a round table theme. Will the works on display be a result of the interests and perspectives of each person on the team? If I understand correctly, these works will not be linked except in the sense that they were chosen by the six of us who engaged in roundtable conversations, and out of those conversations selected works to be on display for the biennale?

CAROL YINGHUA LU: It's very important that the exhibition doesn't become a literal translation of the title. Hopefully our online roundtable discussions in the following days can help us see the theme in a more expansive manner.

MAMI KATAOKA: I like the idea of "A Round Table" as our tentative title and it would be a good way to get the discussion going. We have again begun to describe our condition or status of discussion, but if we imagine how the roundtable discussions can be developed by reflecting on each other's thoughts or reacting to each other's opinions (and in the end there might not be a clear conclusion or agreement), it can be a way to articulate how we are all trying to find small points of agreement beyond history, time, geopolitical distance and urgent issues. It would be like a round table ping-pong and the tracks of our conversation would be like entangled lines with no specific centre. This ongoing discussion would also be able to reflect fluidity and continuity, not solid or fixed ideas.

In relating to this, I am attaching one of Toshi Ichiyanagi's graphic score titled "Music for Electric Metronome" (1960). I am also attaching its instruction on how to play. This is more of an instruction rather than a fixed score. So, players have to both follow the instruction and create their own expression at the same time. I just thought it is a beautiful way of visualising our chain of discussions. We could perhaps also apply this method to how we choose artists. I have been thinking if we could all respond or react to our own or other's choices as reflected in the preliminary list.



We needn't visualise the conversations around the round table in a straight line, but as a series of jumps. Selected artists could resonate with each other for some time and we could suddenly jump to another topic and start another round of discussions. There may not be a whole big topic, but partially we could do interesting conversations and this could be reflected in the exhibition as well. Meanwhile, I was also looking at the idea of "counterpoint" in music. I liked the fact that the origin of this word comes from Latin, "*punctus contra punctum*" meaning, "point against point". This is also related to our methods and given condition.

NANCY ADAJANIA: I'm so glad that, in your opening intervention, you refer to two of the key ideas that I brought to the table at Doha, and will now renew in the context of our round table. Both these ideas hold special meaning for me. They inform my curatorial strategies deeply, as a subjectivity working in a temporal and conceptual space informed by postcoloniality as well as globalisation. I would like to relay these ideas back into the stream of our conversation. The first of these ideas is that of "entanglement", as proposed by the art theorist Sarat Maharaj. The second is what I referred to, in my presentation, as "departures from the score".

Entanglements: I would not wish us to be trapped in binaries or in essentialist identities such as 'women' or 'Asian' curators—the very premise of our having been chosen to form this curatorium. We are more than the sum of our gender and regional identities. About the latter, while I strongly advocate the production of regional histories from within our contexts, I do not subscribe to a reductive idea of 'Asianness' that limits our possibilities of conception, action and collaboration. The cultural theorist Rustom Bharucha's caveat in this context is salutary—Asia-centrism is merely the other side of Eurocentrism. In an age in which networked exchange is the most viable way of being and acting in the world, it would be self-defeating simply to replace an old polarisation with a new one. Instead I would visualise cultural action in the act of flow and streaming among nodes set along a planet-wide lattice. In this context, the braiding together of multiple histories is what entanglement stands for. This stands against the commonly encountered dictum that the old peripheries have become the new centres. The truth is that, in a latticed world, there can be no primary centres. All centres, old and new, are equally off-centres, interdependent on one another

to generate value, whether economic, political or cultural. And following from this, regional histories too must be seen under the sign of entanglement. So there can be no 'pure', 'uncontaminated' regional histories. Every regional history can be seen as the outcome of a series of interfaces, collisions, apprenticeships and transfers of resources. Even our notions of hemispheres, blocs and directional dominance spring from relatively recent schemata. For instance, while India may see itself as being in the East, it was viewed as the 'Western paradise' by China. And the Arabs, who made the first great world atlases in history, drew their maps with the South up, not the North). We could learn from these radical re-picturings of the world. I recently showed and annotated an image of al-Idrisi's map in my lecture at the Summer Academy in Salzburg. It would be lovely to challenge prevailing directionality by presenting al-Idrisi's South-oriented map in our exhibition.

Indeed, it inspires me to suggest, as a working rubric, 'When Direction Becomes Place'. By which I mean that we are not held hostage by where we were born or live, but that location is an outcome of choice, a productive means of extending our subjectivity and agency. Before I move on to the notion of 'Departures from the Score', I would like to insert the Althusserian concept of 'agency' into our curatorial discourse. In my own practice, I have found that it can act as a useful intellectual tool, as well as an incentive for performative action against the various forms of 'interpellations' visited upon us on account of our gender, location and histories. In updating Althusser's idea of agency to respond to the urgencies of our times, the political philosopher Charles Taylor proposes that we should not be reduced to the various "loci of representation", but become self-conscious agents who act out our relationship to the present moment with an awareness of its complicated histories and possibilities: agents who are "engaged in practices, beings who act in and on a world." Through this edition of the *Gwangju Biennale*, we could then demonstrate that cultural actors make their contribution not by being interpellated or being acted upon by the circulation of global capital—whether as artists or curators—but by re-asserting the emancipatory possibilities of their global labour. And indeed, by reclaiming their global labour through open-ended dialogues, the co-production of sites of expressive action and collaborative research. This resistance to interpellation—to acts of naming—and its corresponding insistence on performativity—acts of making—is, in fact, "the first and last freedom" (to borrow the philosopher J. Krishnamurti's evocative phrase), the basis for every other assertion of liberty.

Departures from the Score: I have never believed that we should manufacture a facile consensus amongst us to arrive at a theme. Therefore, at the very beginning of our deliberations, I had proposed that we bring together six different but related themes which intersect, thus embodying powerfully the concept of entanglement. It was on the basis of this idea that, in the heat of our Doha discussion, I proposed a possible curatorial strategy, 'Departures from the Score'. The reason why I wanted to use the metaphor of music was because it would enable us to stage a range of engagements.

It is an apt metaphor for how we function as a group. Rather than feel obliged to sing in chorus, we are entitled to our own solo positions; to make our own departures from the grand narratives of art history, biennale history and even from the themes we may have consensually produced at a specific moment. The curatorial methodology could work thus: There could be passages of consonance and dissonance, caesurae and silence. Some themes could be developed as a solo performance and others in counterpoint to each other. We could begin with a narrational denouement and end at the beginning. The workshops could be placed under the rubric of jamming, the expressions in the journals could be called notations. The idea was not to show only sound or performative works—far from it—but to use the metaphor of music to express the themes that exercise our collective imagination (although nuanced differently by each of us). Themes such as, the tension between the self and the collective, recursions in the form of specific retrievals from the past, the production of regional histories and revisiting of lost histories with an emphasis on entanglement, and many others.

It was at this point that Mami shared with us the score of Toshi Ichiyanagi. And all of us excitedly made lists of musical metaphors that could be used to express the curatorial methodology and content. The next morning we abandoned 'Departures from the Score' for reasons of its untranslatability into the Korean language. I was not convinced, but went with the majority decision. We needn't have translated the phrase directly; we could have opted for trans-creation. But we shall let that be. I am happy that Mami has returned to the metaphor of the score and the departures we can make from it, the many versions we can produce from a single script, theme or idea. And the round table is nothing if not an example of how we make our individual departures from a script that is a starting point. Imagine a theme with many variations, "a body with many owners" as the mystic poet Kabir said. At this juncture, I would like to return to Carol's invocation of the Arthurian image of the round table, which encodes the value of fellowship. It is round because there is no head. However, we should remind ourselves that one seat at Arthur's round table is more special than the others. It was always kept empty: the Siege Perilous, where only a knight who was absolutely pure in spirit (not compromised by the sins of greed, envy, anger and pride) could sit. In our own context, let us treat the Siege Perilous as a placeholder where all our individual contributions may blend and take ideal form.

Arthur's Round Table and Kubrick's: And Carol, I would be careful about referring to Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* and its use of the round table as an image. Just to set the context right, it was set in the Cold War period and was a critique of super power rivalries which were leading the world to the brink of MAD (mutually assured destruction). That's not the round table we should aspire to—I think not! And finally, collaboration should be based on a sensitive and respectful understanding of each other's positions. Collaboration, for me, is about listening (this seems obvious but difficult to achieve) and about acknowledgement (again, this seems natural but doesn't always come easy) of the other's ideas and presence.

It is strange, but at this point where night shades into day, I can only end on a vulnerable note with Emmanuel Levinas, the philosopher who has, to my mind, studied the conditions of otherness, dialogue and understanding most brilliantly: "The face, in its nudity and defenselessness, signifies: 'Do not kill me'." This defenseless nudity is therefore a passive resistance to the desire that is my freedom. Any exemplification of the face's expression, moreover, carries with it this combination of resistance and defenselessness: Levinas speaks of the face of the other who is "widow, orphan, or stranger".¹

ALIA SWASTIKA: I want to respond first to Carol's proposal about "A Round Table" as our tentative title. I like the idea of using a metaphor that is very common for audiences to bring them into a pre-condition to see the way we work. I am feeling that this is more suitable rather than using something very specific like "score" (Nancy, for me, this is not about the translation issue but to give a general idea to the public). In terms of the method of selecting artists or arranging the exhibition, we can connect each work within the circle to represent the idea of a round table. This can also represent the idea of entanglement.

I think we can have six circles to stage each of our ideas in connection with the others. This also can be followed by Carol's first question: "Who are we and where do we sit?". If so, then (in response to Nancy's suggestion) I would like to explore more about my idea of "the odyssey". For me, contemporary art practices today involve more and more the action of travelling/moving, that underline the notion of crossing borders. This moving goes beyond geographical issues, but also art disciplines and ideas that develop into a quest for knowledge and experience. At the same time, artists' experiences are also a journey into past and future, tracing memories and reflecting contemporary reality. I think my idea would be connecting to Carol's idea of "again and again", and also with Mami's idea of solidarity in distance.

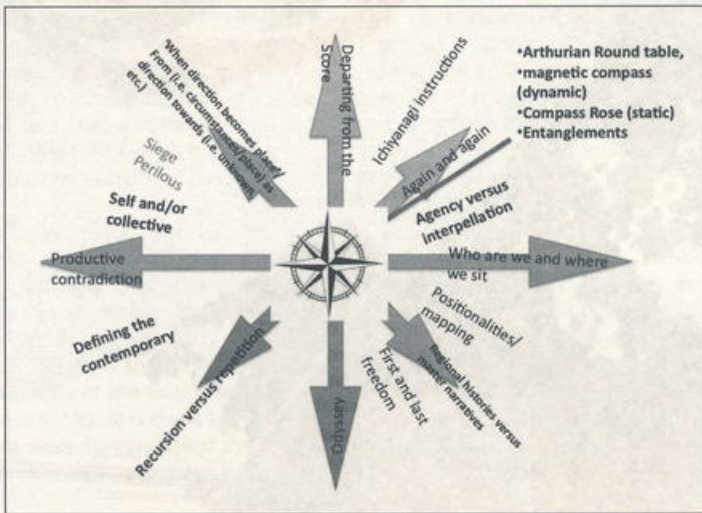
If we choose the title "A Round Table", I would like to propose the phrase that I mentioned at dinner in Doha—"HOM PIM PAH: A Round Table". I think the word "*hom pim pah*" can help in giving a more playful wording, which is audience friendly. By using local metaphor, and reflecting the wisdom and philosophy behind the game, we can present the idea of working together as simultaneously a practice of playing together. When I think more about this game, I feel that it teaches us also how to emphasise our individuality, and value the differences.

NANCY ADAJANIA: While it is important to emphasise the principles of equality and democracy as the basis of all collaborative activities, it is equally important not to fetishise the act of marking difference. Rehearsing difference for the sake of difference is both counter-productive and very addictive. Sometimes differences of opinion arise out of hard-wired habits of mind—which requires that we re-examine such fixities, instead of rejecting difficult ideas. The majority is neither always right nor always wrong. Critical engagement and thinking through ideas and positions is necessary, rather than achieving a proportional parity. To quote Markus Miessen, "Sometimes, all-inclusive democracy has to be avoided at all costs. In order to make decisions within any given collaborative structure, network, or institution, conflicts can ultimately only be overturned and turned into practice if someone assumes responsibility." I would think then that we can assume responsibility for ourselves and our respective practices only if we cease to be connoisseurs of differences and begin to act as agents of change.

SUNJUNG KIM: Thank you for the enriching exchange of ideas following our intense meetings in Doha. I am very much in agreement with the idea that being able to discuss and witness each other's positions is very helpful and the past five months of conversations have also contributed to understanding our own conceptual frameworks better. As I have been again travelling, I was mentally trying to place all the ideas discussed in our emails onto the notion of a round table. As I was doing this, I juxtaposed the ideas of "score" with "odyssey" and "productive contradictions" and "who we are and where do we sit?", etc. and it looks something like the diagram I tried to reconstruct in the image attached below (see page 253).

When I started looking at this, I began to think about the idea of a table with shifting positions and given the ideas of mapping and scores, it occurred to me that a compass is also an interesting device that involves shifting positions. Usually we don't guide ourselves with just one tool (there are maps, landmarks, compasses etc.). Sometimes we know the direction (it may even be unavoidable—like having something that needs to be achieved). However, the way to get there often suffers interference and it is this journey where we become lost and

find the way that also makes visible what we are capable of and how we listen to and acknowledge others, as well as confront various contingencies. It seems that we are arriving at a direction and that now we are constructing our path by the detours, excavations, overviews and shortcuts we need to negotiate and navigate. Even within the notion of structure (as in the scores or the instruction pieces) there are always multiple competencies at work—practical, intellectual and sympathetic. I would imagine these as different guidance devices which we could combine to find the way in different territories. I believe that with the new productions and methodologies of knowledge, art and resource management, we are well on our way to a challenging journey.



MAMI KATAOKA: I would like to respond to Sunjung's inspiring diagram. I wonder if we can add something like 'musical chairs' as an element of game and playfulness, while also suggesting a notion of interchangeability and constant changes. I am hoping that this suggestion doesn't give too much of a sense of competition or survival. The idea of 'musical chairs' finds a connection with Nancy's idea of "departures from the score", my suggestions of instructional graphic scores, as well as Carol's "who we are and where do we sit?" The round forms of all of these, in fact, intrigued me and pointed to interesting connections with Eastern philosophies. In Mahayana Buddhism, the Wheel of Life or the Wheel of Existence is a diagram for Buddhist teachings; four noble truths, origin and cause, and path to the liberations, etc., portraying the mechanism of how *samsaric* rebirths occur. We can find amazing images in Tibetan *thangkas*. It explains the ideas such as dependent arising, Karma, or causal interdependence. The interdependence and mutual conditioning of phenomena is, according to Buddhist philosophy, a critical dimension of the universal natural law which makes liberation possible. We can also find many circular forms in mandalas which are a depiction of cosmic structures. *Samsaric* rebirth resonates with ideas such as "again and again" or "recursion, not repetition." I am not trying to be didactic, instead I am interested in the interdependence of all sorts of cultures, histories, religions and beliefs in Asia. I also like the combination of compasses that represent centrifugal force and the hollow structure of a musical chair format, which would be a good depiction of our condition. In fact, Japanese Jungian psychologist Hayao Kawai pointed out that one of the characters of Western thinking is a strong desire for unification, while Eastern thinking is more about finding equilibrium or balance among conflicting and opposing elements. I am not intending to limit my imagination and thoughts to Asia, but it is interesting to start (or depart) from where we are and to think how.

CAROL YINGHUA LU: I can relate to Mami's projection on the idea of the round table through Asian religions and philosophies, and would like to contribute to the discussion with a reflection on the current 'Occupy Wall Street' event and its global impact. This event provides an excellent model for the coexistence of anarchy and a high level of self-practice and self-organisation, which is parallel to the spirit that the idea of the round table in our discussion evokes. The participants in Occupy Wall Street are educated individuals and carry with them various specific requests and demands, which they articulate through writing, discussions and a microscopic level of exchanges, including one-to-one conversations or small round table discussions taking place in every corner of the park where they reside. There are more than forty work groups arising from the decentralised way that the participants are organised collectively. Their way of self-organisation is based on a sense of self-awareness and independence and is non-hierarchical, flat, and centrifugal, but appears to work especially efficiently. Both basic needs and intellectual pursuits are catered for with the existence of a kitchen, a clinic as well as a library and a spiritual corner. Workshops and round tables are scheduled on a daily basis. In a way, it's a revolution in the form of a salon.

NANCY ADAJANIA: To conclude, I would like to return to an idea with which I began our first conversations in Gwangju—that of self-organisation as an ethic, not only as a form of collective action and revolution. At that time, it was very important for me to insert into our discourse the origin and genesis of the *Gwangju Biennale*—which resides in an act of heroic self-organisation, the May 1980 uprising in Gwangju. This uprising heralded a political upheaval culminating in the democratisation of South Korea. It also prompted a cultural response that commemorates this spirit of dissensus, this spirit of a new and alternative beginning which every edition of the *Gwangju Biennale* incarnates—and which the foundational charter of the *Gwangju Biennale* describes in terms of the "Pacific age". Having said that, it is not my intention to merely romanticise the Gwangju uprising. Rather, I wish to invoke it as an example of a productive impetus to cultural production, arising from the ground of a specific politics, and phrased as an Other to the existing international frameworks and mediascapes in which contemporary culture is produced. This is especially important in a historical situation like the present, when such readymade, media-manufactured phenomena as the Arab Spring are being presented as exemplars to be followed in all societies that suffer repression or oppression, and being celebrated as such by cultural practitioners. This is not to downplay the obvious popular struggles inscribed within the Arab Spring, but to point out that, as with many revolutions, it encodes a process of what the great nineteenth-century political economist Pareto would have called a "circulation of elites", rather than a redemptive articulation of popular energies. The same army that tacitly supported the protestors in Tahrir Square against President Hosni Mubarak in the first phase of the Egyptian revolution of 2011 is now shooting down Coptic protestors and negotiating with ultra-orthodox Muslim groups. What has changed? The interests of army and protestors were identical in early 2011, and they are divergent now. *I would thus contend that, to be truly responsive to its circumstances, cultural production must retain its criticality towards all conditions of existence and representation, including those that seem to give it a measure of freedom. Self-organisation, as a form, can be manipulated by larger political and economic systems. But self-organisation, as an ethic, continuously unknots and remakes all systems of control and domination.*

Today, in Korea, we have the Hope Bus campaign, which manifests itself as an updated form of self-organisation, further along the time-line from the Gwangju uprising. It brings together people who have been laid off, made marginal, with the resources of livelihood and hope snatched away from them by economic upheaval. This is a convention across the lines of gender, class and level of education, to show their solidarity at a time of shared crisis. The scale, locus and methodology of resistance changes constantly. The spirit reincarnates itself through various bodies.

In making these proposals, we are, as I said at our very first meeting, also self-archiving our process. We must revisit the archive of the *Gwangju Biennale*, viewed as a cumulative process of curatorial experiments. Let us go back to a moment in 2002, to the 4th *Gwangju Biennale*, curated by Charles Esche, Hou Hanru and Sung Wan Kyung. 4GB focused on the independent arts spaces and artist collectives in Asia and Europe, premised on notions of collectivity and self-organisation. These were radical adversarial responses, at the time, to the shape, time and demands of the art market and the State. But today, in the context of an all-pervading neoliberal economy, how do we self-organise, and how can collectives address the occupational hazard of becoming entrepreneurs in the so-called creative industries, rather than self-critical self-organisers? An important caveat here is announced by Jakob Jakobsen et al: "In the absence of clearly stated opposition to the neoliberal system, most forms of collective and collaborative practice can be read as 'self-enterprise'. By which we mean, groupings or clusters of individuals set up to feed into the corporate controlled markets, take their seats at the table, cater to and promote the dominant ideology" (2005).

Collaboration must arise from perceived urgency and experiential synergy, not out of the contingencies of funding cycles and global artistic trends. Collectives have become a 'style', and this situation demands that we ask ourselves exactly how the micro-climate of a collective works. This is why, in revisiting the archive of our own biennale, we must annotate it critically so as to retrieve the power of things past, and not simply emphasise the novelty of each edition. Otherwise, we end up with what I have elsewhere called "orphan knowledge", produced in an experiment but left stranded in time, lost in the name of a new that was never integrated into our sense of self. Biennale discourse, at its best, is about continuous recall, retrieval, annotation and reinsertion.

Note

¹ Bettina Bergo, 'Emmanuel Levinas', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003