



Disruptive Difference - Transnational Craft Dialogues

School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester - 17 February 2012

Disruptive Difference was a one day symposium which explored how cultural and geographical dis/location is changing craft practice, and how notions of national and cultural identity are contributing to experiences of craft nationally and internationally.

The event was organised by **the shape of things** in partnership with the University of Leicester's School of Museum Studies, and New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester.

Below are the notes for a presentation which Alnoor Mitha was due to present at the Symposium but was unable to give on the day.

Alnoor would like you to acknowledge Dr Leon Wainwright, who he worked jointly with on the artistic brief for ATM11.

Note: since this was written Shisha has closed.

The Asia Triennial programme: ATM case study

I am an artist, curator and founder of Shisha and the ATM. For the past two decades, I have been working at transforming the Contemporary visual arts and Crafts ensuring that Craft is an integral part of the visual art discourse. My mission has been to present world class artists/makers to mainstream organisations. Promoting, a viable artistic model – on the cultural politics of diversity through the Asian Art Triennial programme or ATM for short.

This presentation will focus on ATM11 and also summarise Shisha's work and how a small arts agency can make a real "difference" presenting groundbreaking ideas to a broad range of partner museums and galleries in Manchester and beyond, connecting cultures, and artists to collaborate on international projects, with an education focus.

Shisha is a small South Asian led, charitable agency established in 2001 and based in Manchester. It is at the vanguard of creative practice, programming landmark projects, which have pushed boundaries, opened up critical dialogue and challenged perceptions in current artistic, cultural and socio-political discourses.

For the past 10 years, I have championed new and dynamic visual cultures from Asia to the UK. For the first ATM, I wanted to establish an innovative collaborative network of curators in Manchester that shared ideas on Asian art. I wanted to connect local people with international artists, but most importantly generate new ideas and turn them into reality. Or cluster of creativity in the city.

Manchester is an important city, with a strong entrepreneurial vision and a forward looking creative attitude – a city that is by the nature of its people and its history, inspirational, welcoming and inclusive. Manchester is also building on its achievements by investing in innovation to ensure a year round world class cultural offer which will attract international visitors and profile and which will link cultural investment more effectively with key priorities. This has particular potential in relation knowledge economy and supporting early year’s development and family learning. Manchester has the largest creative and digital economy in the UK outside London.

Historically, Asia has always had a special relevance for the UK and to Manchester in particular. Trade and cultural links between Manchester and Asia have enriched the respective participants and Asian immigration over the last thirty years has made significant contributions to the economy, business, education, social frameworks, culture and fashion.

So how do we bring people and partners together, inspiring them to be part of our creative cities and cultural industries in the 21st century?

ATM – RUSHOLME TRAIL PROJECT

I believe that we bring people and partners together through sharing ideas, supporting the collective vision, sharing resources and presenting high quality art.

I connected our partners and audiences through the first ATM trailblazer – The Rusholme Project which was a trailblazing international artist residency project leading the way up to the first (ATM08). Rusholme is a district in South Manchester with a high percentage of Asian businesses particularly restaurants famously renowned as the “Curry Mile”, and a multitude of multicultural communities, including South Asian, Middle Eastern, African and Afro Caribbean people living in this cultural and vibrant neighbourhood.

Shisha commissioned two world class artists to produce site specific works in the heart of its cultural and community network.

I invited the internationally renowned artist Rashid Rana to spend a period of time in residence at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2006. Rashid researched and developed his work in partnership with the local Job Centre Plus Building in Rusholme. Using his characteristic technique Rana created a mosaic, or fusion, of imagery to create abstracted images to represent and reflect the identity of the district. Rana’s work is dominated by digital prints in which dozens of photos are arranged like tiles in a mosaic by specialised software to make up large images.

These pixelated images were adhered to 28 windows of the Job Centre Plus building. Rashid Rana’s work was placed on the busiest bus route in the city estimated (100 buses per hour), 62,000 bus passengers passing both locations in each rush hour. In addition, car passengers and pedestrians passing by elevate the estimated weekday passing population to over a quarter of a million people.

The Rusholme district’s acclaim as ‘the curry mile’ was reflected in Subodh Gupta’s sculpture entitled 27 light years, he used stainless steel Indian cooking utensils: Gupta’s sculptures are said to “evoke the sights, sounds and smells of an Indian kitchen”. Gupta’s work was exhibited in the grounds outside the Whitworth art Gallery, a short walk from the Job Centre Plus location.

Over 50,440 visitors came to the Whitworth Gallery to see Subodh Gupta's work whilst it was on display.

The aim of the ATM Trail RP was to:

- To increase awareness of Asian visual arts and crafts and create spectacular site-specific works that engage with the urban architectural vernacular, exploring themes of cultural and religious hybridity, pattern, fashion and food.
- To deliver an accessible and inclusive educational and outreach programme that supports the venue-based exhibitions and community sited work and provides opportunities for people of all ages to engage with Asian artists and to participate, interact and engage in artistic activity
- To create opportunities for audiences to view a range of new high-quality work by leading and emerging artists from Asia and encourage new audiences (including members of the Asian community) to see and engage with this work.
- To provide a framework that enables Manchester galleries to create their own international programme, develop their curatorial practice, and engage new audiences in a collaborative way.

The purpose of the first ATM08 was to create a long-term programme of international exhibitions and residencies by contemporary Asian artists and secure a vital place for the UK in the growing international Asian art scene.

In 2006, I presented the idea of the ATM08 with our partner venues including the Castlefield Gallery, Cornerhouse, Chinese Arts Centre, International 3, Manchester Art Gallery and Manchester Metropolitan University to collaborate with us. I devised a unique curatorial framework that enabled each of the venues to develop and curate their own exhibition and residency, select their own artists, and develop their own links and relationships with their featured country. This resulted in a diverse, exciting and challenging programme of exhibitions and residencies, and educational and outreach programme featuring a range of artists, including both emerging and leading artists from a variety of, Asian regions and backgrounds. An important part of the festival was to enable all the artists to spend time in Manchester, meeting UK artists and curators; working with local communities and producing artwork in response to Manchester and celebrating its diverse population.

Following the success of ATM08 - the UK's first Asian Art festival - the 2nd festival, ATM11 was launched on 30 September 2011 at 18 venues across Manchester and extending into Greater Manchester and Cheshire.

Alongside the core venues a number of new venues and other collaborators added to the partnership including key venues such as Whitworth Art Gallery, the People's History Museum, smaller venues such as MadLab and Manchester Craft and Design Centre and also non-traditional arts venues such as The John Rylands Library, Manchester Cathedral and the new Jodrell Bank Discovery Centre.

ATM11 featured a series of exhibitions, commissions and interventions by 54 international and UK artists exploring the theme of Time and Generation,

Presenting new site-specific work alongside work not seen before in the UK, and challenging stereotypical viewpoints of contemporary Asian artistic practice. The artistic theme of the ATM reflected one of the most important stories of our time: the migration of peoples from one place to other parts of the world. Their growing movement has radically altered our global demographics and given rise to new politics of identity focused on place, territory, belonging, and community. The emerging global networks of connection that have emerged present a novel cultural geography.

Perhaps indistinct from such movements is the new and expanding digital sphere. For many artists this has brought exciting possibilities for their practice. Artists are now able to generate and share ideas that are no longer necessarily to be understood as “Western” concepts of art making and display. They may have drawn upon other sorts of technologies that have challenged the place of art making among globalising patterns of visual communication. The growing range of opportunities for artists is especially visible in Asia: a principal site for the growth of dynamic intersections between artists and their expanding media, as well as the speedily transforming conditions of art’s reception.

Add to this the rapid movement of art audiences, art discourse, capital and artists themselves within and beyond Asia, and a picture emerges of a contemporary art landscape that implicates the broad social, political and intellectual issues of our time. Art ‘in and of’ Asia should be seen as a vital locus for engaging with current social and political events, environmental change and cutting-edge models of creativity and innovation. It brings together sites of memory and the imagination, the redrawing of spatial and cultural boundaries, many evolving beliefs and identities, and the development of novel ways of living and seeing in the current economic climate. This is art that offers a place to think and experience the role of artists in affecting and understanding phenomenal global change.

Throughout history, artists have looked to the concept of time as a site of possibility for their practice. The familiar shape of time has commonly been defined by succession from the past, to the present, and into the future. But this chronology is increasingly being made to seem unfamiliar through the actions of artists and works of art which succeed in turning the concept of succession on its head. Time-based media in particular have been fruitfully complicated by contemporary artists in Asia who are coming to ask alternative, more demanding questions of their materials. Artists are showing the deep potential of art for re-orienting and re-imagining the future in the present, and for re-routing art’s relation to its past.

This is why the ‘time of the now’ for so many contemporary artists seems to look like a time of movement. Artists are increasingly defined by their multiple locations, basing themselves in more than one city, country or continent at the same time. Globalisation of art’s networks has seen artists operating as trans-local negotiators, communicating with a wider world while continuing their attachments to certain settings and localities. Artists are increasingly plotting alternative routes for themselves, bringing the making and showing of their works into contact with new spaces, collaborators and audiences.

The idea of generation may encapsulate these processes of production, and the new sorts of artists that emerge under our contemporary circumstances. Looked at in this way, generation can be interpreted in multiple directions. Certain artists are choosing to respond to established histories of art, by finding a synergy with the historical past which can inform their practice. Equally, artists are seeking original modes of creativity and communication that contradict art’s histories, and which reach and respond to new generations of people. In this sense we should be able to recognise patterns of generation among the diverse ages of the makers of art and its audiences.

But what may come from a direct look at ‘generation’ as a creative concept? As artists come to experiment further with new media, they often innovate and generate new technologies in the process. The new formulations for displaying and distributing art works have seemed to make art more accessible and apparently inclusive. This is out stepping the need for formal galleries or exhibition sites, and teasingly suggesting their obsolescence. Does this create divergent paths in the history of art that need exploring? With regard to generations of artists and art audiences, does this widening of possibilities also create

divisions between the young and not so young? Are these separations unbridgeable? How are concepts of age, lineage, and cultural legacy being rethought in the nexus of divisions among art and technology?

In summary, our interests condense around the following questions:

- How might art be understood and experienced through the concept of 'the contemporary'? How might artists and curators help us to consider the idea of global developments in contemporary art as happening simultaneously with each other? How might we begin to think about art in Asia within a framework of the present, of the now? Whose time do we have in mind when we speak about art and artists 'in our time'?
- How might an interpretative language of 'generation' help to understand art's relation to time?
- In all the excitement over global change, have we run the risk of overlooking the persistent continuities in art practice, and those continuities that art is attentive to? What continues from one (creative) 'moment' to the next in the unfolding of art's stories? Why might it have become important to critically unpack the notion of discontinuity proposed by the sense of the contemporary as a break from the past?
- How have assumptions about art as a story of development been challenged and rethought in the curating and making of art in or of Asia?
- How does craft create its own distinctiveness?

I would like to talk about three key artists:

Rashid Rana

Quddus Mirza confirms: "Rana's work deals with globalization, reflects on its impact, as well as serves as a critique of it. His use of digital media signifies the altered fabric of our societies, which function on the pattern and necessity of transnational operations. Here a work is conceived in Lahore, produced in Düsseldorf, displayed in Cairo and is collected in Chicago; spreading across four corners of the world".

(Rashid Rana: A World Apart, Rashid Rana, Chatterjee & Lal/Chemould Prescott Road.) The title of the exhibition, *Everything is Happening at Once*, takes its inspiration from 1920s science fiction author Ray Cummings who wrote: 'Time is what keeps everything from happening at once.' This phrase almost perfectly encapsulates the dichotomy of Rashid Rana's work; the initial appearance or apprehension that everything is in opposition is far too simple. The possibilities of what can co-exist at the same time are endless – it's a paradox that cannot be resolved. In addition, tensions between the external and internal worlds, notions of West and non-Western, tradition and modernity are all implied and discussed further in David Elliot's essay. An earlier title idea for this exhibition, *The Double Life of Rashid Rana*, did not survive but the intention persists. Rana as an artist is both present in his work and yet absent, as if the man himself somehow embodies the paradox and conducts it from afar only revealing as little or as much as is required.

The exhibition is framed across three themes. The first, *Dis-location*, follows the temporal exploration implied by the title, most literally embodied in the work of the same title, juxtaposing micro images of contemporary Lahore against the macro of an old colonial building. If time has a co-conspirator it is space, or the dimensions of space to be more accurate. Rana's striking photosculptures force 2D images into 3D space, stretching the pixels whilst retaining the appearance of a photographed object. If this really is our 'still life' Rana has the ability to both implode and explode our conventional ways of seeing.

Between Flesh and Blood, the second theme cuts straight to a heart of darkness, exploring physical conflict whether sexual, human, animal, even the particles of flesh themselves. *Red Carpet 1* (2007) is an

intelligently weaved spider's web; the everyday carpet viewed from afar becomes the bloody abattoir scenes up close. It's both illusion and reality, abhorrent and beautiful, the graphic micro images are provocative yet the slaughter of animals for human consumption is an everyday occurrence. A specially commissioned new film work, *The Anatomy Lessons* (2011) employs a similar technique for the moving image although here the action cannot quite be deciphered and the narrative intentionally unclear. The series *What Lies Between Flesh and Blood I, II and III* begins to introduce and initiate the more formal conceits emerging in Rana's latest work, large mosaics of skin and blood, literally making overt reference to a Rothko-like experience.

The final theme, *An Idea of Abstract*, marks a return to formal concerns seen previously in Rana's earlier paintings. The *Language Series* photo-mosaics appear to be large-scale serene landscapes, abstract in the macro, yet surprisingly tightly constructed from hundreds of Urdu and English shop signs in Lahore. *Desperately Seeking Paradise II* (2010–11) is a formidable wedge-like structure that is made of mirrors and intimate layers of individual photographs of Lahore. These are personal memorabilia for the artist – home, city, studio and a place to interact with people – there is the potential to be both voyeur and accomplice. The ability to see oneself in the structure is an effect only achieved at certain angles; space, unlike time, allows you to travel in different directions. *An Idea of Abstract* reflects Rashid Rana's training as a painter yet it really demonstrates his technical and conceptual accomplishments across several media and his refusal to be defined by one. Rana, like time, continually moves forward and forces his practice to question exactly what really is happening at once.

Pushpa Kumari Name: Ms Pushpa Kumari

Age: 6-6-1969

Art Style: Artist in the Mithila style of traditional Indian art. Mithila painting is an art form from Madhubani district, Bihar. Traditionally these were ritualistic paintings done on the wall by women for occasions such as weddings and religious festivals meant for private viewing and passed down from one generation of women artists to the next. In 1969, a severe drought in the region heralded a major change – the government in an effort to generate income and employment began to encourage the women to paint on paper. Since then, Madhubani art has become a popular traditional art of India, practiced by both men and women.

Recent Exhibitions:

- New Visions: Contemporary Traditional Folk Art show at IIC New Delhi 2011
- Contemporary Traditional Folk and Tribal Art show for the Delhi International Arts Festival December 2010
- International Folk Art Convention, Diamond Jubilee Celebrations, Nek Chand's Rock Garden Chandigarh, 2007
- Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form VAG, India Habitat Centre New Delhi, 2007.

Representative Collections:

- National Museums, Liverpool, UK.
- Mithila Museum, Tokamachi-shi, Niigata, Japan
- Private collection of American artist and art patron Scott Rothstein

Achievements:

- Featured in the first auction of contemporary art in France in December 2007 as one of two traditional artists in the collection.
- Represented in USA by Cavin-Morris gallery, one of the top 20 galleries in North America.
- Travelled to Japan to demonstrate Madhubani art at the Mithila Museum

NH Harsha

Indian artist N S Harsha has produced Thought Mala or “spiritual garlands” to be worn by visitors in the Victorian Gothic splendour of The John Rylands Library. The artist intends them to transform the library into a spiritual place full of ritual, as visitors borrow the garlands as they would a book, wearing them, handling them or simply contemplating them. ATM11 has also commissioned Devika Rao, a prominent British-based Indian classical dancer to devise a specific dance piece responding to N S Harsha’s garlands at the launch.

Thank You

Alnoor Mitha

Director, Shisha FRSA