

Why Sculpture, Why Here

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Co-organised by Tate Modern, Iniva and Henry Moore Institute

Participating artists: Subodh Gupta, Abel Barroso, Dilomprizulike (The Junkman from Africa), Huang Yong Ping, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Mamiko Otsubo, with a conclusion by Sarat Maharaj

Conclusion by Sarat Maharaj

Friends and members of the audience, ladies and gentlemen, the day has been a resounding success and may I thank the brilliance of the artists and their presentations and the analytical power they have brought into play in discussing their work. It's rare to find, I think, artists who are able to be both creative and capable of critiquing that creativity at the same time, and we found that without exception today. It also leads us to answer the title question straight away, 'What is Sculpture and Why Here' (have I got that right, I'm not sure... something along those lines, quite blunt).

I'll take up where Maria Magdalena so interestingly and rather intricately unpacked her relationship with Marcel Duchamp's 'Large Glass' and the final secret work he did over twenty years (when he was supposed to have given up making art altogether, he was secretly doing this work, which when it was unveiled by 1966 was really a peep hole through a pair of rather heavy wooden doors); to see Maria Magdalena unpack this and look through the peeping hole and come to a definition of sculpture which she approaches from various directions, I was reminded of Duchamp's own struggle to define what he was doing: was it sculpture, was it painting, was he a kind of glass painter in the most common sense at the point of high modernism? All these questions of course still surround those works today, but one of the things he does say is that he's attempting to give us a form of art in which he's dealing with an unknown object in four dimensions. You can see how, straight away, he's departing from the idea of sculpture as a three-dimensional, monumental, gravity kind of object. Towards the idea of the four-dimensional, or in fact, an unknown object in an infinite number of dimensions, talking about passages, processes, activities, engagements, flurries, all sorts of episodes and events which must count under the term sculpture, if we wish to use it.

But already by the turn of the last century, the term sculpture comes under a great deal of pressure and is in a way dropped by the 1920s, and if we stick to this

work, and to Maria's unpacking of it, we see how we are dealing with a kind of performance, and I hesitate to use this word, preferring rather an episode as standing in for that kind of activity that we had chosen to discuss as sculpture. It brings us then to the range of things that have been presented to us today, such different things and yet such points of connection and contact between these various artists. It reminded me of D.H. Lawrence saying in his famous and beautiful book 'Mornings in Mexico' that we talk grandly about Mexico, but we are essentially talking about this town, this house, this little muddy patch, with this dog sitting beside us, and yet our language takes us into a kind of stratospheric height, into large cosmic generalisations, into the desire to make statements that have a universal import.

And one lesson we might take from today's presentations is that we have to focus on the singularity of each one of these artists. How there is a very particular voice we need to attend to without always wanting to rush them along towards larger general and universalistic statements about, well, this is what it means, this is what sculpture is all about, this is how we should understand it and unpack it. And reading on from that particular story by Lawrence, I have two philosophical notions in mind: singularity, itself derived from medieval Christian thinking and writing to contemporary Western philosophy, which is engaging increasingly with other forms of thinking, and this singularity I would see in terms of a Hindu/Buddhist philosophical concept of thisness, the very thisness of these particular presentations which prevents us from classifying them into some larger category, such as belonging to this sculptural tradition or belonging to this identity or belonging to this particular kind of artistic category.

So what was interesting for me today was listening to the new problematisation of the relationship between gender, sculpture, identity: who is the artist, can we explain the artist in terms of their origin, where they come from? Is sculpture a particular territory, or has it been entirely de-territorialised as an unknown object in infinite dimensions? So if the question is, 'Why Here', then we are immediately posed with the implication that there is some 'there' that we are talking about as if they were some opposed worlds today of the kind that we used to think about perhaps 10 or 15 years ago. 'There' is the world from which the other artist arrives 'here', and 'here' is where we unpack the meaning of the other artist in terms of his or her origin, his or her sense of belonging or uprooting. This kind of model of thinking of both the practice of sculpture or art in general and the idea of the artist as

essentially tied up in the territory of practice and in the territory of identity, has been de-territorialised in our time. And I sensed in the presentations today an intersection between the older way of thinking of the artist's territory, genre, gender and identity and a newer way that is emerging; perhaps we are not so much aware that we should not explain these works in terms of point of origin, dwelling, place and location, but in terms of an emerging global space in which such sculptural practice is understood. That of course brings with it both a kind of freeing of the artist, of the practice, from its anchorage in a territory and from our ways of thinking, which Mamiko so wonderfully resists right to the very end, that you must be explained in terms of your Japanese origins or in terms of even the residual trace of your Indianness or your Africanness; that in resisting this, one is moving towards a completely de-territorialised way of looking at the self, the producer, the practice. However, at the same time, this entering into the circulations in the global space, unanchored, uprooted, unmoored, untied to any sense of location, produces the kinds of art, the kinds of activity and engagements that I think we have found increasingly questionable in our contemporary world. What I found interesting in the presentations today, was an awareness of this tension, that on the one hand, it seemed almost impossible to shake off this trace of the point of origin. On the other hand, the artists themselves were quite keenly and in quite a resistant mode looking at the place of origin as a source and as a repository from which they might draw certain energies, certain forms, certain voices, to which they would question the 'hereness' into which they have been inserted.

So to sum up this whole body of rather abstract thinking, I would say we are speaking today of not just juxtapositions between the 'here' and 'there', between a European identity and a non-European one, an entirely privileged identity and a subordinate one. I think those juxtapositions with that sort of clarity to them, with absolute lines of distinction, have in many ways become blurred and complicated in our time. We are speaking, then, not of juxtapositions, but of entanglements, and it is in this terrain of entanglement that I think most of the practitioners need to be understood, entanglement with all the collisions and contradictions that entertains, contradiction not necessarily as a negative thing but contradiction as an element of creative force and newness emerging out of what would appear to be unsquarable elements.

'Entanglement' brings us of course into the company of what I should call the awkward squad of six artists who presented. And this word that Dilom has given us today, awkward, I think fits the bill perfectly. There is an awkwardness in trying to generalise when works are so singular, there is an awkwardness of trying to squeeze them into the category of sculpture, when sculpture itself has so journeyed out of its traditional territories. There is an awkwardness with regard to calling these artists Japanese, Indian, African or whatever the case might be, when in fact they have rather awkwardly journeyed and tried to square the unsquarable throughout their journeys in the global space. Those are a whole body of issues we need to bear in mind, but the practice of sculpture itself, it seems to me, is a rather awkward one. I'm reminded here of the great African dancer, perhaps the greatest contemporary African dancer, Seydou Boro from Burkina Faso, who recently danced at the Barbican, again rather poorly attended because few could understand in advance the import of his dance, which is exactly what I thought I felt had happened with the kinds of sculptural practices I observed today, that sculpture or what we call sculpture, this activity towards an unknown object in countless dimensions, is a mode of thinking, is a mode of analysis.

If we see sculpture as this analytical process, we find it rather awkward to squeeze it back into the notion of the 3D object into which it should belong. It belongs by not belonging, and the question that Seydou Boro the dancer answers when his son asks him, 'What are you, my father?', he resists having to say, 'I am a dancer', it doesn't sound like a decent, respectable job to have. A young boy in France expects his father to go out of the house with a briefcase at perhaps half past eight in the morning, and there are certain rules of decency, respectability or at least just recognition that this is how a father behaves, but this is the father who dances and at the same time doesn't dance something that looks like ballet, doesn't dance any of the traditional dances of West Africa or India; he is involved in that awkward thing which he calls 'the it'. I am 'it', I do 'it', we are involved with 'it', and you could see how all of this is a matter of sidestepping or trying to find an alternative to the word sculpture which seems increasingly tied up with a particular age.

We might say that it emerges as a distinct generic mode at the end of the Enlightenment. If we take Lessing from the German tradition, Lessing was the first really to theorise in a systematic way all of the different artistic forms of work, all the different art forms of labour and sculpture he distinguished from painting, from

poetry, from writings of other kinds, from dance, from the semiotics of a whole range of artistic work. It's very interesting that this distinction between the territories of sculpture, painting and dance emerges at a time when Adam Smith is asking the same question in the field of non-artistic work. Adam Smith is asking in 'Wealth of Nations', what can we really call productive labour, what is labour that produces wealth as opposed to labour which seems to be repetition and out of which no increment is achieved. Adam Smith was laying down the foundations of a capitalist model of economic life, and this fantastic revolutionary theory, as it was at the time so beautifully described by Adam Smith, especially in his analysis of the pin-maker, serves here as one way for us of thinking the division of artistic labour, divided up into particular zones; each person makes a different part of the pin, for example, at the pin factory. In the same way, artistic labour is divided and carved up into its various domains and territories, sculpture being one of them.

I felt that this awkwardness that Dilom speaks of also reminds us to what extent conceptualisation is not an intellectual, philosophical activity only. Again and again philosophers have pointed out to us how it is through art and artistic practice that certain forms of thinking emerge, which eventually go on to get sharpened and honed into what we call concepts. But here, listening to Dilom, I felt we saw the processes of conceptualisation, this was a practice about thinking which thought about itself, a self-reflexive kind of practice, which is at the same time a process of conceptualisation. My point being this, that today we must see what we call sculpture as part of a knowledge production process and therefore define it in its largest sense in terms of the knowledge economy in which we find ourselves.

Abel Barroso touched on this knowledge economy and the tremendous sense of imbalance we find in it. The Mango Tech Company, as opposed to the Apple, is a fantastic and vivid way of speaking of those imbalances and speaking of the kind of world we might be in a way marooned in to some extent, in those hand-made computers in the kinds of poignancy that they have as standing outside a certain zone and looking into the most advanced areas of the knowledge economy. We begin to see a distinction drawn between virtual spaces and visceral spaces, and we find a great shift towards what is called brain power, away from what used to be called brawn power, or labour power as understood in the old systems of economy. In the knowledge economy this focus increasingly on brain power, on the virtual, mean that certain forms of skill, certain forms of knowledge and labour do come to be de-

validated, de-skilled and de-legitimated. And I think this very feisty questioning that Barroso puts up about what is knowledge, where does the knowledge economy function, what is the relationship between these different aspects of knowledge, disembodied knowledge, knowledge from the body, these distinctions that are implied, pondered and mulled over in his work, I think are extremely relevant for us to consider. They are not entirely new in some ways, because what came to mind in listening to Abel was the Alea film 'Memories of Underdevelopment'. This very powerful film, from Cuba or between Cuba and the United States, also pondered the notion of developed economies, developing economies, or what used to be called underdeveloped economies; the notion of developing society, what are the conditions of creativity in those societies, how is the contemporary artist constructed in a developing society, what are the infrastructures of schooling. It was very interesting to listen to Dilom speak about having to take five years or more to finish the degree in his college, precisely because this throws light on those very restricted codes of what is school and schooling as far as art education goes across the developing world.

So that would be one of the dimensions I would want to be considered very fully in trying to answer the question sculpture and hereeness, that it involves the issue of resources and schooling, and it ties in with the whole area of knowledge economy. I won't go into greater detail, but if we just think of the early institutes that were created in India at the time of independence, that the criticism made of the Indians at the time (you're an underdeveloped country, you should be concentrating on agriculture, what on earth are you doing with creating these institutes of virtual learning), and we know that the great designer and artist, Charles Amis, had visited India and had had long discussions with the Indian political establishment in establishing the first institutes of design and technology, and he had said that India should concentrate for the future in a knowledge economy based on papier-mâché technology. Well, of course this was treated as a joke across the world – what could he have meant? – but he was speaking of the forthcoming society of computers centred around knowledge and the vast intelligence and knowledge gathered in India over 50 years, which was largely based on very low-tech elements – and this was another echo I found in thinking of Abel Barroso. Largely these technologies, these institute technologies had groups of students studying under trees, solving mathematical problems on slates with chalk. From a very low kind of technology

there emerges a kind of knowledge which would connect that part of India to the larger knowledge economy at its most sophisticated levels.

What I'm trying to say is that increasingly, if we unpack the work that we've seen today, we will see these intersections between so-called low and high, between the advanced and the underdeveloped or developing, the worlds of tactility, the worlds of cloth and touch and textiles, contrasted to the world of the cerebral and conceptual and intellectual. Increasingly in this work, I've found these intersections and these elements entangled and brought forward in a new kind of problematical observation of the contemporary world. When I listened to Subodh Gupta, of course I was deeply interested, this is one of the first artists I had heard of in my kind of limited knowledge of the Indian art world; one of the first artists I've heard of to come from a region which in recent times has been deeply stereotyped as a backward, lawless region of India. I think even Subodh described it as the Wild West of India, and yet all his language is taken from this particular region, from the everyday utensils, the stainless steel objects of the kind of lower middle class of India or the peasantry that is now entering urban spaces and beginning to organise itself in the urban world. He uses the notion of the cow as milk-giver which is there in almost all Indo-European cultures from Scandinavia right through Iran into Northern India in particular, this image of sheer productivity, of sheer abundance of the sources of wealth and economy. This region once seemed to be the zone of enlightenment, which precedes the Enlightenment I've already referred to of the eighteenth century in Europe; this particular North Indian province is where the Buddha came from, where the long debates in Indian thought over what we call atomic realism and materialism began. It is important for us to remember that there are these traces and residues in particular regions in particular locations; do we shake them off altogether as we enter the global space, or do we somehow connect with them without wanting to be entirely defined and identified in terms of those points of origin which, nevertheless, are deeply engaging and important for us in terms also of world civilisation and not simply in terms of, this is where I grew up, and what do I care if the Buddha came from the shack next door.

I would like to end by looking at an image I didn't quite want to show, but a few days ago, we had a very large map printed in the Guardian of the team of the Conservative Party getting itself prepared around Cameron for the forthcoming election. We were looking with a group of research students at this particular chart,

which was written up over six months by John Hoskins who spent hours drawing and re-drawing this and then eventually presented it to Mrs Thatcher in 1974 (you can see it's the 1st October, so it's some sort of anniversary for this diagram). It's called 'The Wiring Diagram', and in it, John Hoskins tried to analyse what was wrong with Britain, and he gives the legacy of policies of the Labour Party and how disastrous they were, or the implications. It's really quite an understated diagram, but it shows someone thinking visually – simply diagrammatising a thought process, the connections and so on – and then he proceeds to show the implications and effects, sort of a doom scenario for Britain at the time, and why Mrs Thatcher was so important in reversing this process of onsetting doom in England.

It's an image which shows thinking through the visual, what I call retinal thinking, in which the principle of causality is central. We expect a certain kind of argument, stages in the argument, a certain step by step procedure that should make sense, that should appear to be logical even if we dispute the whole analysis and diagnosis given of Britain of the time. I wanted to contrast that with what I observed in the six ways of thinking that were presented to us today. These were no causal ways of thinking – how should we describe the complete non-causality of the thought processes we saw in the works today? It's a process of sticky thinking I feel; someone did mention the word sticky, but maybe the more chewy word here is a process of glutination, a glutinative thinking; you put ideas, images, elements next to each other and simply combine them with the loosest of associations and conjunctions. It's this and that, this herb and that particular bark, this particular grass and that particular stone, as we saw in the 'Herbalists Shop' in Maria's work.

So I should conclude by saying that in this process of glutination, this way of thinking, in bringing things together that apparently don't seem to follow each other, the non-sequential kind of thinking, the kinds of thinking in which elements are thrown together so that some new space, some new thinking, some new texture, some new body of affect and feeling and emotion, new elements of thought and subjectivity are produced, this glutination is what was visible in the works we saw. How that relates to the terrain of science and certain forms of glutinative thinking also in scientific work was what I wanted to show through this image of a laboratory in work, in order to ask the question, what is the laboratory space in which these artists have been working or how should we see that it is not located 'there'; the junkyard

laboratory is everywhere in some ways and in fact is what we should be examining a little more closely.

I'll end by simply being a little sentimental, because Huang Yong Ping is here and I remember meeting him in 1993/1994 in Rouen at the great symposium on the work of Marcel Duchamp. Being a rather nutty vegan, I was a bit scandalised by the work Huang Yong Ping had put together. Every vegetarian gets a bit touchy around Huang Yong Ping's work, but I was delighted that he should have today, after so many years, turned those issues round; we see him sculpting and shaping a kind of discourse of provocation, debate, response and alienating people, in order to provoke discussion around the issues of animal and human rights. On that particular day, I think he had some scorpions and butterflies, I dare not think about it... I think I shut my eyes and looked away, I'm sorry to say, Huang Yong Ping, these are confessions after many years, and it was Madame Duchamp who then brought the subject to an end by taking us away for a vegan lunch, where Robert said, Madame Bovary and I just wanted to remember this in order to see how strange elements glutinate and get thrown together in ways that are least expected.

Closing Remarks by Penelope Curtis

I want to say thank you to Sarat firstly, for his very graceful summing up, it's a tall order to sum up at 4.30 after having only just heard the papers, so we're very grateful to you and also particularly because you perhaps were trying to resist summing up, you were talking about the singularity and disparate quality of the different papers, so thank you for summing up something that maybe didn't want to be summed up too much.

I suppose, wearing my sculpture hat, I feel that some common strands certainly emerged in terms of the sculptural language; we saw that again and again in terms of how sculpture can replicate and reproduce, it can insert real objects into sensitive places. The question of material wear and how material shows age and signs of where it's come from and how it can be re-used, and the question of drama and performance, and the way that objects can be part of that staging – I think all those things came together repeatedly through the day and we're very very grateful of course to the artists for six excellent presentations, and I think everyone here must feel with me that we couldn't have been luckier in the artists who spoke.

But I also want to say thank you to the curators who chose them, because they were six good choices, I think. So thank you Celina and Stephen and Martina for making what was such a nice selection in terms of the way they worked together. I hope that we in our institutional contexts, Henry Moore Institute and Invia, supported you fully in this endeavour and I just want to finally mention Ellen Tait who did a great deal of the organisation and bringing the artists over and we did have, as Dilom mentioned, some problems with visas, some rather last-minute worries, and I should acknowledge the help of the British Council in organising a couple of last-minute visas to get the artists over here. I'm glad the British Council's trick worked, thank goodness you came and thank you very much for the day.

Transcribed by Jackie Howson and edited by Marion Endt.