

Tagore, Pedagogy and Contemporary Visual Cultures

Notes from meeting one: Sat 23 November 2013, Iniva

23 November 2013, Iniva, London: the first workshop takes place as part of the exhibition Anna Boghiguian & Goshka Macuga: Tagore's Universal Allegories, curated by Grant Watson.

The first session focused on the question:

- How we might understand Tagore's legacy as relevant for contemporary art practice and curating?

By this, we don't mean to insist on a relation or any relevancy, but to use Tagore's ideas (which might be understood to be futurological, as well as ideological and arcane) as a springboard to engage in discussions about contemporary curating and artistic practice.

Workshop structure:

1-2.30pm: Introductions/initial interests:

Everyone introduces his or her practice and interest in Tagore
10 minutes each + discussion

3-4.30pm: Sound, text, image, object

Everyone introduces an object, sound, image, text or material, memory (etc.) through which they want to think and experiment with Tagore's ideas.
10 minutes each + discussion

4.30: summary, things to take forward

5: performance by Ansuman Biswas and guests

NOTES FROM DISCUSSIONS:

Introductions/initial interests:

GRANT:

- Traveled to India 1995, visited Santiniketan, looking at Indian art. Interest in Tagore was in his artworks. A poet that became a painter later in his life, by making doodles in his manuscripts, these became more elaborated, figurative.
- His works are now 'National Treasures' of India. Difficulty of showing them outside India.
- Made Santhal Family: Positions around an Indian Sculpture, exhibition at MuKHa in 2008 with the Santhal Family by Ramkinkar Baij (1938), which is at Santiniketan campus.
- Intersection of the initiative of Santiniketan and left politics in India. The left didn't reject Tagore completely, although there were critics. His illusion of a simple life with the people.
- Inspiration: conversations with Rustom Bharucha, reading *Another Asia*, his book on Tagore and Okakura. Idiosyncratic view of Tagore, mostly played out through ideas on friendship and cosmopolitanism. Deals with the idea of being Asian. - Rustom's interest in making a museum of Tagore. Focusing on ecology.
- Tagore as dandyish figure, choreography of the self, very compelling fact put forward by Rustom. The idea of an art of life. Everyday art.
- Progressive figure, set up microcredit systems, invested in rural regeneration, proto-anarchist figure. Community based relations, anti-state, anti-bureaucracy, and large political structures.
- Tagore was very committed to universalism. How we can think about that? For him it was wrapped up in a spiritual sense. But it was also political in the sense of dealing with East and West. World

consciousness. Santiniketan had a sketching nature. Everything could be put together there. Cosmopolitan place. Unpack universalism through the term cosmopolitanism.

NATASHA:

- Curatorial research project Landings deals with land history and land forms as protagonists of the modern.

<http://www.wdw.nl/landings-3/>

Interests:

- the construction of Tagore as a figure within Indian context
- Sriniketan - an ideal space to remodel one village in a way that becomes emblematic for a universal understanding of what India could be
- Tagore's acknowledgment that he is a landlord. Interesting moments of discrepancy
- Landings is researching the reception of *Dak Ghar (The Post Office)* internationally. There were 100 performances of *Dak Ghar* in Germany where it was understood as an anti Fascist play.
- Tagore's language as an ecopoetics.

ANJALIKA:

<http://otolithgroup.org/>

- Relationship between Tagore and the image abroad, in the West.
- Teachers that come from Santiniketan described the place as quite oppressive.
- Tagore was turned into a great figure, who had an ideal project and they had to transmit to these students this heightened state of realization in relation to modernism.
- Bucolic relationship with nature. Although he was interested in caste, nature, ecology he was misogynistic towards women.
- My father, coming to the West. Remapping, liberating himself. Working class artist (involved in stage design). Tagore was influential.
- Relationship of upper-class Indians with caste.
- Need to remove Tagore gate-keepers. Representatives of this other space called India.
- Remove yourself from home in order to reflect it elsewhere.
- Expert is not important here
- Mutated relationships to the events and histories.

ADRIAN:

- Late 60s. Tantric art books.
- Negative connotation, Tagore being everything I was against in education at that time.
- British colonialism in India. The Indian language is formed within the nexus of the Aryan tradition, through the invention of the idea of Indo-European mother tongue. Saussure.
- The black and the yellow remain abject. What can become universal is a voice from India. Connections between the Sanskrit language and the Indo-European mother tongue. Mother tongue is derived like black holes in space. Symptoms which you wish to ascribe to an origin. Sanskrit became a whole set of western vowels.
- Importance of racial, colonial, profound, stereotypes of the details of what language is, may still haunt us in the way that we might now look at Tagore differently. In terms of notions like cosmopolitanism, decolonizing the self. In what ways can we look at it from the perspective of the ghost of that Indo-European paradigm?
- Tagore is centered and produced as universal by the number of different people interested in him, of tiny bits of him.
- All those different fragmented forces tend to place someone in the position as if universal.
- How to think about the way we can figure the vast quantity of fragmentary Tagores? What constitutes as universal, in another way shatters into a thousand little pieces, which we don't need to take together. Otherwise fragmentation tends to result in an involuntary universalizing.

ANDREA:

- Studied at Dartington in late 80s where Tagore had complex legacy
- As feminist I found him difficult, as socialists it was our duty to reject his version of cosmopolitanism

- This elite philanthropic model still haunts the arts in Anglo-European culture; it is the economic and aesthetic basis of contemporary art and its institutions: Tagore was at once a progenitor of and a subject of this.
- I recognise Dartington as a bourgeois utopian experiment meted out across historically poor land, but an experiment that fostered conditions of pedagogic and curatorial politics that are absent in art schools today
- What new organizational models are of interest and what do Dartington/Santiniketan/Sriniketan allow us to imagine?
- Gradually coming back to Santiniketan model and thinking about it in terms of curating: what might be a communitarian model of curating that is worth investigating, as an antithesis to the current capitalized model?
- Alternative economies, alternative pedagogies: these are related.
- How things get arranged, how things get seen: eco-poetics and their relation to economics.

ANSUMAN:

- I am Bengali, I am born to a singer of Tagore songs and a poet. Poets like my father can't avoid the huge shadow looming (many people tried).
- There are many amazing poets, writing in Bengali, but they write in the language that Tagore invented.
- But I was in London. I wasn't in Bengal. I grew to hate Tagore, found him very boring. Upper-class.
- Tagore has been co-opted by these highly educated, sophisticated guardians. He is an example of what happens when your creation leaves your direct ambience... goes into the hands of other people, how can you control it? Tagore's suffered hugely because of the profusion of the production, available to be used, and to be abused.
- Actually where is he? Shattered fragment of mirror we are trying to use.
- Dartington was the closest I can get to Santiniketan, which is a horrific parody. But Santiniketan is also a parody.
- There are so many readings of Tagore. It becomes an impenetrable barrier. You keep finding things that contradict what you understood. When you try to reconstruct this figure, and look into history, there is a danger of turning this pillar of salt, i.e. inorganic, dried, ossified.
- There is something in his work that has some relevance now. There is the spiritual, the scientific, there are political insights, insights about nature that can be relevant.
- Not sure that academia is the right place to have this discussion.

THERESA:

- Education. His influence on certain groups of people in the surrounding area, in Tower Hamlets.
- Reading *The Post Office* from being in the UK, not in the US.
- (Local community) The Bengali youth I work with don't know who Tagore is.
- Heritage.

GABRIELLE:

dutchartinstitute.eu

- Internationalism - introduced by Trotsky. That was my motivation to engage in education. Tagore was on the other side, a world I was not into.
- DAI. *The Home and The World*. How to get around gatekeepers in the artworld?
- We (DAI) miss a Santiniketan, because we are nowhere. It is very hard to find a connection to this home. What that home is.
- Global campus.
- How can that campus be relived in a new place and how can it relate to the world?
- The political, the poetic, the ecological, the archive. Finding the models and economy for that are the big issues.

SHANAY:

- Cosmopolitanism, from South Asian perspective
- Mapping histories of exchange between India and the west.
- Satyajit Ray's relationship with Tagore, manifested in his work; but also, they had some sort of relationship.

- Photograph of Tagore amongst pink flowers.
- Affinities and association through object and image reproduction.
- Relationship with Vitoria Ocampo in Argentina;
- Ocampo gives to Tagore the chair in which he was convalescent. The chair didn't fit the ship cabin; they had to take out the door and walls. This chair accompanies Tagore to Italy and then to India, and is preserved in Santiniketan. The chair has enabled him to understand at last a particular poem of Baudelaire.
- Strong erotic nuances in the jokes about the chair. Tagore wrote two poems on this chair before his death in 1941.
- Rammohan Roy – 'father of modern India' also very cosmopolitan figure.

KODWO:

<http://otolithgroup.org/>

- Satyajit Ray's films, *The Home and the world*,... synthesized music. Tagore's evocation of Bengali domestic interior life.
- Tagore as a traveller. Geography of his collaborations. Inventory to Ray's sonic transposition of Tagore's text. Text becomes the film, the film needed the music, and the music in that transposition returns to that map of travellers. Incomplete map.
- Tagore's travel to Japan, 1916
- Santiniketan as a total artwork.
- Missing film, film of Tagore on a boat on the way to Japan.
- Sense of a missing cinema, a cinema of Tagore in those rooms, in those ships as he travel around, writing those letters. What would the sound of those films be? The films Ray hasn't made.

CHRISTIAN:

- Notion of prototypes. Attempt to come up with tools or structures, the function of which is not yet known, or no longer known.
- How to live together, the home as a satellite, which is in orbit with another entity.
- Asceticism. Correspondence. Travelling. Inhabiting the position of the visitor.

Sound, text, image, object

Shanay:

Shows film footage of Tagore in Kahn's garden.

- Documents Tagore's visit to Albert Kahn's residence outside Paris 1921/27.
- In the garden where the famous photograph was taken, with the flowers. Ray emulates holding the portrait of Tagore.
- Conscious decision to stand in the same place. Inscribing within the politics and the idea of what Tagore was, as paying homage simultaneously. (Funny way of walking).
- Who is the woman? (A niece?)
- The fellow travellers.
- He was wealthy (his family). Opium?
- Bauhaus in Calcutta exhibition (Bauhaus Dessau 2013)

Anjalika:

Reads Tagore's Ode to Africa (1937).

- He never visited Africa.
- Racist?
- Anti-slavery, anti-colonial mixed with repulsion.
- India's colour chart

Ansuman:

Shows video – Archive (Season – Matrix cut)

<http://youtu.be/LHva6w11JT8>

- Film about an archive. Video-installation. Projections onto 4 saris. 2 from Bengal, 2 from Devon. 2 Modern, 2 Old. Commissioned by Picture This to explore the relationship between Dartington and Santiniketan.
- Plymouth archive material: using footage (granny black and white) of industrial agriculture from Dartington, opposed to very modern digital video from Bengal, workers using thousand years old agriculture methods.
- Images from the ritual around my grandmother's death. Death is the loss of memories. On the opposite screen, a woman giving birth, high of technology 1970s. The stereo sounds of the 4 films on the room mix together.
- Couldn't find anything of Tagore in the archive.

Grant:

Reads Anna Boghiguan's letters – fictional

- During *Tagore's Universal Allegories* Anna Boghiguan's sat in the gallery writing imaginary letters to or from Tagore, but also between other people and places:
- Letter to Tagore from the New Kunst Museum Berlin. His work banned by the Nazis.
- Letter from Joseph Beuys to Tagore. (Drawing)
- Ezra Pound to Tagore. On the admiration of his father after reading Tagore's Poems.
- From Tagore on Egypt. Liberation and democracy. Expressing doubt about nationalism.
- Anna Boghiguan's letter to Tagore. Cairo Egypt. Visit to the university. Memorial of Tagore's death. Visiting his bedroom, his garden.
- Letter from the Rothko Chapel to Tagore. Meditation. Similarities with Santiniketan's prayer room.
- Letter from an unknown refugee from Pakistan.
- From Tagore to Einstein: it just repeats the word aesthetics
- From Tagore to Yeats. Success of the play *The Post Office* in Dublin.
- From Tagore to Grant: Tagore doesn't know how he will be able to be present at the opening of the exhibition.

Natasha:

Reads an excerpt of a letter by Tagore from 1893 and show images

- Being in the background.
- Journey to South East Asia.
- (Sugata Bose) vernacular cosmopolitanism. International reception of *The Post Office*.
- Multilingual narration of Tagore, subverted the high class Bengali, mapping the languages of the north east of India. As a political act. The waiting for the king becomes the waiting for the State. An old actor plays the part of the child. Tagore appears to write in a child like way, the experiences of the world as viewed by a child.
- Translations of *The Post Office* in Poland. Tagore never went to Poland. The reception is beyond him as figure. *The Post Office* was read as an anti-Fascist narrative. Janusz Korczak. Implication of death through the script becomes manifest.

Adrian:

Plays extract from the *Incredible String Band*

- North Africa, Middle East, India. Music. Western musician's attraction to this music. R. Shankar, etc. Critique of colonialism/cultural possession – double dynamic. The Beatles; a violation.
- The Incredible String Band. Being possessed. Syncretism.
- Affective guide to the risks of taking any interested in Tagore at all.

Andrea:

Circulates Dartington papers. 8 from the 4th series, 1981. Vernacular Theatre.

- The Theatre Papers express a perhaps naïve commitment to a rural community practice that seemed possible throughout the 70s and 80s. The Illustrations resonant of this belief – bourgeois tricksters coming to the village, etc.
- As Dartington students we wanted to produce a socialist or even a communist post-modernism.
- Negotiating postmodern failure with the real, failure of the Left in the UK
- We read the Tagore/Elmhirst correspondence about rural agrarian transformations based on equality as we lived in an idyll. But basis of socialist arts practice were set there/reinforced for many of us.
- Curatorial and pedagogical culture that we are immersed in now is totally capitalized. We need to re-find the praxis of learning in/as equality.

Gabrielle:

Circulates a book made at the DAI. Here as the centre of the world.

- Students travelling world wide,
- Enschede. Vernacular.
- Artists working for 3 weeks at the city of the other artist.
- Taipei (Taiwan), Damascus (Syria), Beirut (Lebanon), Khartoum (Sudan), Diyarbakir (Turkey) and Enschede (The Netherlands)

Kodwo

Reads a letter from Tagore 1916 from Japan

- Traveller who is a figure as an optic. The traveller is the person that brings a specific optic that prevents him from seeing. Reception. Misgivings. Curiosity.
- Reflection of someone who is very clear of being on celebrity tour. Reception that he follows as he moves around Japan. How to stay one step ahead at that.

Christian:

Shows handmade sandals

- Travel. Opposition Bharucha makes between locomotion and pilgrimage.
- Attraction, orbit, magnetism. Movement.
- Prototypes. Sandals. Body, psychobiology, thinking as doing, doing as thinking. Notion of prototypes. Attempt to come up with tools or structures, the function of which is not yet known, or no longer known.
- How to live together, the home as a satellite, which is in orbit with another entity.
- Asceticism. Correspondence. Travelling. Inhabiting the position of the visitor.