

The Layering of Unintended Meanings

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http://www.quadrilogy.org/en/theory_individual?page=2

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On the occasion of the new installation Public Notice 3 by Indian artist Jitish Kallat (born 1974) in the Grand Staircase of the Art Institute of Chicago Daniel Kurjaković, head of program of the Burger Collection, and Linda Jensen, collection assistant, conducted the following interview with the artist. It focuses on notions of history, on founding historical texts as sculptural elements and the reception of regionally specific histories within a global context. Following its policy of supporting selected artists on a wider scale the Burger Collection has acted as a main sponsor to this exhibition of Kallat (on view from September 11, 2010 through January 2, 2011 at the Art Institute of Chicago).

Daniel Kurjaković: Where did you come from now and where are you heading to? What are your immediate travel plans?

Jitish Kallat: I have just come from home in Mumbai, and after the opening [in Berlin] I will go back home, that's really the immediate travel. The next trip out would be on the 22nd. I have to be in Tilburg for a day. There is this project Lustwarande 2011 – Blemishes, taking place in Baroque woodlands [Park de Oude Warande, Museum De Pont,] in Tilburg in 2011, so I'll make a quick site-visit followed by a two day jury meeting at the Metamatic Research Initiative in Amsterdam on the 22nd and the 23rd. So that's the traveling for this month.

DK: So it's basically Mumbai and a couple of one-day trips.

JK: Yes, hopping in and out.

DK: In terms of the works that you will be showing and installing on these different occasions, how many of them are site-specific? Generally, I'm interested in how your work now methodically manifests within the different sites.

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Can you describe how the practice looks like?

JK: Actually, site specificity would be an exception rather than a norm. There were instances where works have been very site-specific or context-specific. *Public Notice 3* is of course all of that in its maximum. It brings date, site, moment, the historical location, the location of the artwork itself together—everything becomes one. In March 2011 *Public Notice 2* will be shown in the Kennedy Center in Washington that has an enormous space called the Hall of Nations. The Hall of Nations is a very long space, 50 feet high, and it has various national flags all lining the top; to place the speech that Gandhi delivered calling for peace within this context will add a subtext to this work. Then again, it is not something that I would count in the same way as *Public Notice 3* where it is all so intended and planned.

DK: The specificity of *Public Notice 3* is interesting. But before we look at details of the piece, let me just say that also in terms of the research project 'Quadrilogy' of the Burger Collection, we are of course dealing with artworks coming from very different regions world wide. So there is always the inherent problem of de-contextualization, on the one hand, of works that might be rooted to some degree in the context of their production. And on the other hand we have of course the general condition of mobility within globalization, which sometimes dramatically relocates works of art, sometimes forcefully countering the more *specific* questions that the works might contain.

JK: What you suggest is a peculiar condition of this moment. Here's an experience from just two hours ago: Upon my arrival in the hotel room, I unpacked my suitcase. And when I switched on CNN *Inside Africa* was interviewing Alistair Soyode. He had started BEN TV [Bright Entertainment Network Television], which is this black-oriented broadcasting. Interestingly the ad for this program I had just seen in Mumbai before I left. In this hop I had made across one and half oceans the conversation that began with a televised experience got completed upon my arrival in Berlin. This condition cannot be discounted when we look at an art object or an artistic stimuli. Artworks seem to make connections through traces of overlap and familiarity across borders; while this peculiar globalized condition of shared cultural knowledge is a facilitator I also think the inability to fully comprehend a piece or its context also a valuable experiential condition in today's world of ever increasing similarity.

DK: You don't seem to speak only about the usual hermeneutic problems of misunderstanding. It's more about some kind of utopia within global communication, where meaning is not fully controllable and has a lot of gaps and coincidences playing into that—often with funny undertones. Are you saying that our media condition with its potential to create new contexts both in terms of information and in terms of side effects, that come about through a kind of uncontrolled montage, might point to a contemporary dynamics that structures the entire process of art reception?

JK: Yes, I think you have phrased it as close to how I would feel about it. There is always a productive misunderstanding which is in some ways a layering or a refracting of meaning because somebody else has got a slight mis-reading of an object. I think of it as a slight mis-registration. In fact, if you look at 3D pictures the fact that they look 3D is because they are mis-registered. They get a dimensionality because they are just kind of "off" and that off-ness I think is quite valuable. For instance, a sculpture of mine, *Aquasaurus* (the title of course suggests that it is a water tank because of the word 'aqua') cannot be an oil tanker or a milk tanker. But when it got shown in Sydney, everybody spoke about water scarcity, which is a national concern. I'm interested in that productive slippage as well as the enrichment through a layering of unintended meaning. There is this object that seems to have suddenly eloped from the territory of meaning that I had set for it. Its eloping to me is its mobility, its search for new meaning.

DK: This sounds almost like a 'psychotropic' situation within the contemporary art world with its free associations bordering on arbitrary fantasy. On the other hand, how loose can you get once you build a whole array of culturally specific symbols into an artwork? Actually, did something akin happen when you recently showed *Public Notice 3*?

JK: I'd like just to conclude something we spoke of before. One of the reasons I said that one would not want to sort of strictly carry these kinds of dialogues [about translation and cultural specificity] into the studio is because the act of conceiving art needs to remain unburdened. And hence the choices one makes allow for a sort of poly-semantic or multi-layered meaning. As for *Public Notice 3*, people brought their own meanings to it. When we opened *Public Notice 3*, there was of course the moment of 9/11, which remains a very loaded

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moment in the United States. There were other recent news in the media that became points of conversation within the space of the artwork; for instance, the American pastor's the desire to burn the Qur'an as well as the controversy surrounding the Islamic Center in New York or 3 weeks later the communal strain in India while awaiting the Babri Masjid verdict all began to enter conversations around this piece. And by conversation, I mean simple one-to-one conversation amongst viewers who cite ongoing occurrences alongside their experience of the varied themes enshrined in a work such as *Public Notice 3*.

There are two or three things that the piece is made of: one is the connection to site [World Parliament of Religions/ Art Institute of Chicago] and date [9/11 1893 and 2001] and their overlap like a palimpsest connected through the speech delivered by Swami Vivekanada at the Parliament. Its also interesting to think that in the pre-world war time the need for a dialogue of faith was carried out in the form of a parliament—not of nations but of religions. The artwork itself sits in the intersection of varied crossroads of utterances and dialogues. As an artist I recede and let meanings generate out of these crossings of meaning, intersections of certain kinds of evocations: one is the speech itself and the other is its refraction through the five-colored threat code as if it were a truncated rainbow of terror.

DK: I was wondering about one detail: It seems to me that the non-violence speeches of Gandhi, or similar utterances of hope, are perceived as almost romantic in the West. Contrary to this, you once described such speeches as "discarded relics." Why go back in such a direct way to such "anachronistic" instances of political discourse?

JK: The revocation of some of these texts happened at a time when many of the speeches that pollute our public domain, at least back home in India, were and are hate speeches; speeches injecting paranoia or a fear of the other. It's not very different in other parts of the world. Isn't much of the United States overreaction about security a kind of paranoia inducing method creating consent to take people to war? There is a whole history of how nations build consent through fear or hate. It's a global phenomenon, but my experiences with each of the *Public Notice* pieces emerged out of a very specific local condition. *Public Notice* for instance was conceived at a moment when the very idea of Indian secularism was stood tested. As a child you are told that India is a secular

nation and all Indians are brothers and sisters etc. And then [in 2002] you had the worst form of inter-communal violence in Gujarat [between Muslims and Hindus] and I felt this was the moment to turn to foundational speeches. That's how the first act of burning Nehru's words came about. The *leitmotif* of fire was actually the backdrop of the moment when he delivered the speech and it was also the moment of the Indian sub-continental partition and riot where a line was drawn by Lord Radcliffe and millions of people had to cross borders and leave their homes. But there was also the formation of the nation. So that speech delivered as absolute hope for a future occurred against a backdrop of fire and bloodshed. I carried those memories of a rather discouraging moment in 2002 through the act of burning into the piece, along with the distortion that happens when you position yourself in front of the words. The closer you go to *Public Notice*, the more you get splintered.

Something similar happened with Gandhi's speech in *Public Notice 2* because the scale of the work does not reveal the bones very quickly. From a distance it's just like a white drawing on a yellow wall. Only when you come closer you start experiencing a three dimensionality, mainly through the shadow. Then you read this call for peace, or for peaceful resistance. It was a very loaded and poetic moment in Indian political history when Gandhi broke the Salt Act that denied any Indian the right to make salt. After giving a full forward warning 30 days before, he actually informed the British that he was going to break this act. So just as he set out to do this march he realized that he could either be assassinated or arrested. And if either of those things had happened there would have been a civil war. In a way it's a call for revolt, at the same time it's a call for complete resistance with complete non-violence. It is a mixed and layered moment and a layered speech as well. And somehow the memory of having to arrive at this reading through this memory of violence is the experience of *Public Notice 2*. Of course anyone else who sees the work might describe it differently.

DK: The translation of historical references into a kind of visual or sculptural language of course remains very important in *Public Notice 3*. More precisely, you translate embodied speeches into language to be looked at. So, there was not only the semantics of the speech, but also the bodily rhetoric of the speakers with their expression and charisma. Language read and speeches performed are two very different materialities, it seems to me. According to

you, what is involved in this transfer from the vivid materiality of the voice to the spatial setting of the sculptural presentation of text?

JK: The voice continues to be active in the *Public Notice* works except that here it is no more the voice of Gandhi, Nehru or Vivekananda, but it is the voice of the viewer himself or herself, through the experience of reading. In *Public Notice 3* the Grand Staircase has two entrances to come into and then the mid-landing separates it into the left and right side and after the second mid-landing it goes to both sides into the four wings of the museum. What happens on the lower level is doubled, and on the upper levels it's quadrupled. Which means that any direction you take, you read the same set of words but you might take the entire part up and you might feel that you haven't read the whole thing, step back and want to read the other side. You would then create an echo of your own voice. Through the doubling and the quadrupling on the two wings of the staircase, it's like a visual echo. I think of speech, sound, voice, and of the viewer's acts of reading in fragments, the re-reading of two parts and the staggered reading because of partial illegibility—it is not easy to read burnt or illuminated texts.

DK: When you mention the staggered reading it is not only the disruption of the text and of a specific work, but, in an allegorical sense, the disruption of the text of culture or society.

[...]

Linda Jensen: I will delve a little bit more into *Public Notice 3*. As we have mentioned, in this piece you employ the speech of Swami Vivekananda. In his welcome address he said that he is proud to belong to a religion, namely Hinduism, which in his view has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. Several modern theorists of religious intolerance such as Bernard Lewis and Mark Cohen tie intolerance to monotheism. What are your thoughts about this?

JK: In fact I am very clear that *Public Notice 3* isn't a commemorative project. For instance there is no image of Vivekananda as also in *Public Notice 2* and also *Public Notice*, it's not about the individual speaker, but historical moments within which certain words were uttered. There are actually specific moments,

and in none of these instances have I thought about them as voices of specific individuals. For instance if you just walked in with no information altogether, you and the words are the experience. There is no Nehru in *Public Notice*, there is no Gandhi in *Public Notice 2* etc. But again with Vivekananda it is a very interesting situation. The first time I worked with this speech in a piece called *Detergent* in 2004, I had actually burnt Vivekananda's speech onto a mirror to create an internal dialogue, within my own practice, with *Public Notice* where Nehru's speech at the midnight of Indian Independence was cited. So in a way I have referred to this piece in a completely different instance within the internal complex situation that Hinduism finds itself in when hijacked by a certain right-wing militant ideology. It is also interesting and somewhat ironic that some of these groups have co-opted Vivekananda for their purpose. They have actually used words of Vivekananda, often de-contextualized them, and Vivekananda's own legacy is now somewhat debated.

DK: Let me get back to a question concerning the reception of art on a macro-level where we deal with a certain discrepancy between geopolitical regions and the term of art. In an interview with Shaheen Merali you mentioned that certain interesting Indian artists are not visible on the world stage and you mention the "Progressive Group" as an example. How do you position yourself in relation to the problem of history, i.e. the invisibility of certain locally important artistic achievements on a global level?

JK: In the interview with Shaheen I was actually thinking of the whole middle generation in Indian art. The "Progressives" had their own moment; they are actually the first generation of post-Independence artists. Their practice is calling for re-evaluation because they were far more complex than they appear, in the sense that something could appear very cubist but then the figure rendered is a figure of Mother India with its own history within kitschy calendar paintings or evoking posters made during the independence movement where the nation was rendered as a goddess. That whole history gets funneled through the image that appears somewhat cubist.

Art historians such as Geeta Kapur have done phenomenal work in this area. It's just in the sort of broader dialogue that I feel that Indian early modernism and its complexity can be re-visited and will definitively have something to offer to other modernisms elsewhere. There is also a middle-generation who was

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active, say, in the 1970s and 1980s, and made some phenomenal work that has not been understood, at least on the international level.

DK: In a sense, such intricacies call for a re-evaluation of the critical tools that serve to observe and construct art histories in the context of globalization. Most of the known instruments don't allow us to get productively out of the deeply linear logic of euro-centric art history. Even some of the experimental historical methodologies, like the Warburgian method of comparative and trans-temporal analysis, have remained without real consequence for post-colonial studies. How can we—globally speaking—understand the simultaneity of our situation? And by that I don't simply mean the simultaneity of the contemporary global art world, not only the synchronic simultaneity of the presence but also the diachronic simultaneity of different histories.

JK: Indeed this might be the moment to invent new tools that help disentangle the world and its recent history at a time when data is over-produced and sometimes even the most trivial of information(s) get archived and blogged and tweeted and re-tweeted. We'll need fresh instruments to recede and contemplate and understand where we've been and where we are going.

This interview was conducted over the telephone on October 4, 2010. See <http://www.artic.edu/aic/exhibitions/exhibition/kallat> for details of the exhibition.

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In its on-going series »Theory / Conversations« the Burger Collection engages in conversations with artists, theoreticians, art historians and critics about changing topics related to the exhibition and research project 'Quadrilogy'. The 'Quadrilogy' was started in 2009 and will evolve in the up-coming years under the curatorial leadership of Daniel Kurjakovic. A first series of conversations with art historians and theorists such as Manuela Ammer, Berni Doessegger, Michael Gnehm, Catrin Misselhorn, Stefan Neuner, Beate Söntgen, Frédéric Wecker, and Giovanna Zapperi was published in the first exhibition catalog titled *Conflicting Tales* (2009). More information about the first exhibition, the catalog and further aspects of the 'Quadrilogy' can be found on the homepage www.quadrilogy.org.