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This paper by Zoe Butt was delivered in conjunction with a panel CHINA IN ASIA/ASIA IN CHINA: Imagining Asia in Contemporary Chinese Art, organized by Columbia University and Asia Art Archive in America. From the perspective of contemporary visual art practice, this panel interrogate the role of China in Asia and Asia in China from multiple perspectives. Acknowledging that the concept of Asia itself is a construct which has been put to multiple purposes in the 20th century, this panel looked at how projects in this Asian space have begun to emerge in the imaginary of contemporary practice in China, particularly in the last five years. This panel also explored how China figures in the imaginary of artists today, and in particular artists working in India, Japan, Korea and Vietnam.

I believe the success of an artistic project often arises at the moment of a culture collision and in late July 2009, in Beijing, at an evening of much bai jiu, cigarettes and cringe-style canto-pop, while sitting in the antique wooden chairs of a country long proud to be named the 'Middle Kingdom', I found myself in a curious conversation about the nature of a cultural and artistic alliance. Confronted by a room full of very successful Chinese contemporary artists, I asked one of the most respected artist/curator of his generation, of his thoughts on collaborating with artists from South East Asia, to which without pause he asked 'Why would we consider it a good strategy to partner with the rear of the vanguard?'

I was not surprised by the logic of such a statement as it did reflect several years of particular research and experience of working between China, Vietnam and Cambodia. I was disheartened at how clearly this cultural attitude has affected the nature, form and potential of China's cultural and artistic contemporary exchange. I found it disappointing that China who I believed had significant potential to model a new regional paradigm for the discussion and circulation of contemporary art history and production, should be so hoodwinked in historical chauvinism, laced with the lure of global (read Western) economy. Just where this chauvinism is anchored is a question. Perhaps some essentialists would remind us that the Han Chinese as early as the 4th Century, considered South East Asian people to be an 'unhistorical' barbarian race destined to be subjugated by others (largely determined by their darkness in skin tone and perceived failure in forming cohesive national groups)[i]. Though this view is historically worthy of one interpretation, the issue at hand - namely the complex possibility of cultural exchange between China and South East Asia, looking particularly at Vietnam and Cambodia - cannot be so easily determined.

In today's ever expanding circuit of curatorial intelligentsia who travel the globe in search of talent, who land in cities with little arts and cultural infrastructure (such as Vietnam or Cambodia), artistic value is largely determined by the benefits of the international art market with its colonial overtones that dictate preferred aesthetic, dismissing a great amount of local art production as derivation rather than arguing a contextualized originality (one could look at Vietnamese artist Nguyen Trung and the influence of Cy Twombly; or the influence of China's cynical realism and pop aesthetic comparing the work of the Luo Brothers to Ha Manh Thang).

In greater Asia particularly, the issue of appropriation and derivation, coupled with a market-driven landscape is dangerously limiting the growth and development of a critically thinking, locally specific, contemporary cultural discourse and infrastructure.

So firstly to give a little background on these various art scenes and how their social context affects the interpretation and understanding of contemporary art ... in contrast to the explosion of hardware and software in China's contemporary art scene (its museum buildings, commercial galleries, contemporary art precincts and art fair halls; its collectors, sales managers, bank sponsors and experimental artist-initiated university contemporary art curricula), Vietnam has little 'ware' to speak of.

It has no dedicated contemporary art museum, no collectors purchasing contemporary Vietnamese art that is circulated abroad; a French university curricula that has not changed since 1924 and does not teach contemporary art history; it also has no critical comparative resources or textual/visual archives of 20th Century culture and society. Vietnam's first millennia were under

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ARTISTS, CRITICS, CURATORS, AND OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

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subjugation to China and the country remains proud of their ability to oust China's rule single-handedly.

Vietnamese Ministry of Culture officials look to the dollar success of their artistic big brothers in contemporary China and question how Vietnamese artists can do the same, but they are extremely hesitant to engage China on such a cultural conversation when political tension between the two countries remains at one of its highest points in the last decade over territorial disputes over the South China Sea.

Despite the rare occurrence of permitted public protests in 2011 in Hanoi and Saigon over this territory, the Vietnamese government is also very mindful of China's much needed investment in various resource industries (such as the mining of rare mineral) that greatly affects policy making in the country.

In contrast in Phnom Penh in Cambodia, where China is today the country's leading investor of infrastructural development^[ii], where Pol Pot's Chinese-backed regime destroyed 95% of the intellectual population and its resources, there are a total of 10 students enrolled in the Fine Arts program of the University of Fine Arts; and the country is problematically controlled by foreign NGO who are also the sole supporters and interpreters of the visual arts. There is no financial support for artists and most 'collectors' are expats who would rather spend 500 USD on a fancy meal than support local culture and thus the price point of a sale is not consistent with what it would possibly gain abroad.

Though China's contemporary art landscape is diversifying with a strong network of differing players on the production, collecting and educational end, private museums in Songzhuang still languish with the scampering feet of the sales-pitch 'curator', where providing any critical form of interpretation of an art object is either a flowery nonsensical paragraph evincing the stereotypical power of Chinese tradition; or at the opposite academic end it is an algorithm of theoretical jargon, attempting to challenge Western theories with Chinese thought, which makes the art-loving pundit shrug with confusion.

While exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art in Vietnam and Cambodia are next to null, there are relatively few exhibitions of South East Asian Art seen in China, save for a handful of commercial galleries, artists and independent curators such as 'Pekin Fine Arts' and 'Tang Contemporary'; Biljana Ciric's exhibition 'Strategies from Within' in 2008 and the collaborative programs of Caochangdi Workstation initiated by film maker and documentarian Wu Wenguang.

What is of crucial question for all these contexts here is audience - to who are artistic and curatorial endeavors important on the local level? If an artist can gain critical reception in New York or Berlin, on terms that are relevant to a Western argument of aesthetic history, how is this made relevant on a more local or regional level of production? Where does the role of interpretation and its possible political persuasion hold affective power and influence on this local level? Particularly relevant to this discussion is how does the hardware and software of a local or regional arts infrastructure, its formation of relationship between producers and interpreters, affect an artist's social attitude towards foreign artistic exchange and dialog.

Within Vietnam, China is perceived as a success story - not because they are particularly compelled by the messages within their art, nor that they particularly respect its various forms - their determination of success largely resound with the auctioneer's gavel of sale. In Vietnam particularly, what concerns the Communist Party's Cultural Ministry is how to make Vietnamese contemporary art a financial and tourist asset in the same way of China. However of key issue is how to ensure the artists, patrons and public do not critically challenge the relationship between production, discourse and display as practiced within the international art market (artists such as Ai Weiwei are well noted in Vietnam and it is not mere coincidence that his manipulation of social media is encouraging Vietnamese fire-walls and now also censoring local website content such as the recent show of Nguyen Thai Tuan at San Art). The systems that generate interpretation of culture are kept under relative political surveillance in China, Vietnam and Cambodia and increasingly in my experience it is through independent intercultural exchange and the necessity of translation in this context, that new modes of dialog, new praxis of making can confuse government control and thus open up discursive space - locating knowledge networks, practical infrastructure and embracing flexibility in project goal are paramount to ensure productivity.

A pertinent case study here is the artist-initiated entity called the 'Long March Project' and its initiation of the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' project^[iii] (begun in 2009). This complex and controversial undertaking has had exhibition/discussion platforms unravel in Beijing, Phnom Penh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vientiane and Shanghai. The 'Long March' entity is composed of the 'Long March Project' charged with the mission to investigate critical discourse surrounding art and culture, and 'Long March Space', a commercial operation set up initially to financially support the artistic experimental non-profit endeavors of 'Long March Project'.

The 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' project endeavored to '... be a collaborative contemporary arts project whose mission was to implement physical, discursive, and artistic activities among China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.... [calling] for a questioning of fixed relations within social production as determined by ideas of history, identity, market logic, and the subconscious effects of a geographically imposed divide.^[iv] It encompassed public and private forum, workshop, curatorial residency, research trips, a month-long physical journey through these countries and was also recently prominently featured in 'Rehearsal: 8th Shanghai Biennale' 2010.

In 2009, in my then role as Director of International Programs of 'Long March Project', I was excited for this project of artist Lu Jie (the founder) as I thought it would challenge the persisting narcissism found at the heart of a great quantity of Chinese contemporary art - an opinion also shared by Lu Jie. I thus set about creating a network of collaborators in this region who would co-implement the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' project's mission.



Ho Chi Minh Trail, organized by Long March Project. Photo courtesy of Zoe Butt

Funding was found, and the project began in July 2009 with an intense one-month 'Long March Education' residency program with artists and curators from this region. What I learnt from this 30 days of discussion with individuals from Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Phnom Penh, Seoul, New York, Hangzhou and Beijing was that this project marvelously encompassed so much historical trauma and disconnected cultural memory, so much subsequent social distrust, nationalistic pride and psychological misgivings that I could see how this dialog was starting to break down many local cultural and political assumptions that I believed held great potential for the subsequent creation of provocative art works.

However the founder of Long March Project began to doubt the plausibility of collaboration with these parties in concern that the ensuing aesthetic and dialog would not be of 'international' critical relevance and translatability. Constructive, yet heated discussions were had in Beijing concerning the problematic 'democratic' framework of an art collaborative project; about the need for a directed curatorial vision in the success of an aesthetic and intellectual project; about the complex need to move on from the historical prejudice of the past and look towards new forms of social interaction and partnerships - but how to maintain quality? Consequently, the whole framework of the project was changed with the decision to have Long March Project dictate the shape and form of all encounters. I understood the need for these questions and the 'push-pull' relationship between satisfying local and international project goals for a growing organization gaining national and international credence but in realizing that the basis of my securing this regional network of friendship - namely giving the chance particularly for Vietnamese and Cambodian people to speak and direct action and form on an equal contributing platform with Chinese participants, was not a possibility - I found myself in an ethical dilemma as the curatorial facilitator of the project. While I acknowledged that the curatorial cohesion of a project based on so many conflicting opinions and differing contextual realities would be tough to conjure a visual exhibition or intellectual discourse with the expected international rigor, I also knew that this project opened up the possibilities for a new form of cultural engagement that could on a local level enact dynamic social change that would greatly benefit the artistic communities involved in the long term. But the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' project was a curatorial endeavor, an artistic statement with a desired aesthetic that ultimately was about China.

The accompanying catalogue is an art statement unto its own as image after image of Chinese artists in romanticized travel mode, production mode, discussion mode command. Only Nguyen Nhu Huy (from Ho Chi Minh City) and Viet Le (Vietnamese descent, living between Phnom Penh and LA) were actively participating in this project that was largely a philosophical and rhetorical exercise largely prioritizing Chinese perspective. While I feel the intellectual strength of it and could see the coherence in such a strategy, I found it also greatly contradicted the Long March Project desire to open up the 'pandora's box' of interwoven cultural histories in this region. My own misgivings were matched by the skepticism of artists in Vietnam and Cambodia, many of whom preferred to refrain from organizational involvement and participation as a result of the change in project direction. Their skepticism arose from various issues such as the titling of the project (the trail known as the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' is of great political sensitivity in Vietnam and any local examination of its history and relevance is vetted by the government); general confusion about what they were expected to contribute to this highly theoretically-anchored series of discussions that asked more questions about China's perspective of history than their own; it was also about the lack of time and interpersonal sincerity and equal collaborative participation that made a large number of the artistic communities in Vietnam and Cambodia feel like they were yet again mere props for a well-rehearsed play that spoke about them not with them. They wanted the international accolade more than they wanted to sincerely and genuinely 'march' on a road where their own sense of time and urgency would have to be re-aligned.

Soon after this residency intensive in July 2009 in Beijing, I decided to relocate to Ho Chi Minh City. The week before I left, a good friend and very well-respected Chinese artist and curator sincerely challenged me by asking 'What are you - a curator or a social worker?' It has been a question that continues to resound in my head. If helping an artist understand the international context of where their work is about to be exhibited, by acknowledging they don't have access to education that could equip them with the skills to write about their work; that to sit with a group of artists and encourage each other to work through our relationship to self-censorship in the face of a society governed by heavy political restriction; if you desire to introduce other artistic ideas as form of knowledge production in the face of a great public lack of access to resources; if you desire a world where globalism can nurture new discursive and financial models of localized knowledge and art production - are these curatorial strategies deemed 'social work'? Does the concept of cross-cultural artistic engagement necessitate social and political negotiations that demand a psychological re-assessment?

When John Rajchman asked that I discuss the Long March Project and its 'failure' I found his judgment perplexing as ironically the concept of 'failure' is at the heart of the Long March Project's artistic and curatorial philosophy. It engages failure as an inherent act that enforces individual and collective realization. The 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' project may not have unraveled in the way it was initially perceived, but it has definitely illustrated that the cultural, political and social histories that entwine the artistic communities of China, Vietnam and Cambodia greatly influence the contemporary attitudes towards each others relevancy - the question I continue to push is how can the culture of art be made a useful tool for these attitudes to take new forms.

[i] Michael J Sullivan <http://www.africaspeaks.com/reasoning/index.php?topic=7445.0;wap2>

[ii] <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Phnom-Penh:-thousands-of-people-displaced-by-booming-Chinese-investments-21250.html> (viewed July 16, 2012)

[iii] <http://www.hochiminhtrailproject.com/html/e-main0.html>

[iv] 'Introduction: Long March Project - Ho Chi Minh Trail' in YISHU, Vol. 10, No. 2, March/April, 2011, p. 4.

For more information about Zoe Butt and San Art, please click here.

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