

Migratory Aesthetics: art and politics beyond identity

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In the very moment when finally Britain convinced itself it had to decolonize, it had to get rid of them, we all came back home. As they hauled down the flag [in the colonies], we got on the banana boat and sailed right into London...They had ruled the world for 300 years and, at last, when they had made up their minds to climb out of the role, at least the others ought to have stayed out there in the rim, behaved themselves, gone somewhere else, or found some other client state. But no, they had always said that this [London] was really home, the streets were paved with gold, and bloody hell, we just came to check out whether that was so or not.

Stuart Hall (Hall, 1991, 24; Brown, 1995, 271)

There would be a sign; dreams end...Then there would be paths and they would get jumbled, and bones, and they all get jumbled, and all of them would combine and then there would be a tall tree, that, according to the map was red.

Kathy Acker (Acker, 1997, 271)



Identity

A galleon on the high seas, captained by the *Exquisite Pirate*, fashioned after Kathy Acker's *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, the quintessential outlaw living 'free of authority'. And the *Reverend on Ice* – a headless skater, fabricated – like the pirate – from cloth fragments. She and her ship – along with the skeletal figure draped across the bow – are rendered as a vast felt collage, advancing across the walls surrounding the Reverend's frozen pond; his colonial dress is constructed from



African printed cloth (that turns out to be made in the Netherlands).¹ 'They would all get jumbled' as Acker puts it; this is why the pirate, adorned with booty from other ships, her authority not given by the state but taken by force, was an emblematic figure for postmodern appropriation.

In a room in the National Gallery of Victoria (Melbourne), these two action figures come together in an exuberant and somewhat macabre dance in the midst of what is, in essence, a show about migration. Specifically, the exhibition *Contemporary Commonwealth – CC06* for short –

¹ This quintessentially 'African' fabric was produced in the nineteenth-century by the Dutch and English – often using Indonesian batik traditions – and subsequently exported to West Africa, the region with which it is characteristically associated. Shonibare has utilized this fabric precisely to undermine the concept of authenticity in cultural production.

focuses on the territories of the British Commonwealth – a union with little local significance or purchase on its notional membership, other than by association with the Commonwealth Games that are the occasion for this cultural celebration. Given the uncomfortable spectre of Empire, however, the exhibition eschews the notion of a given or shared Commonwealth identity, focusing instead on an array of journeys within or between Commonwealth nations. Many of these embody the playful debunking of postcolonial separation evoked by Stuart Hall in the above anecdote, which points to the fact that immigration presents a profound challenge to the privileged sense of identity at the heart of the imperial nation.

In fact, in the terms of this event, migration displaces identity. If postcolonial exhibitions have in recent history provided occasions for the articulation of new or previously suppressed identities, *CC06* aligns more readily with a post-identity politics that focuses on relations and connections – and hence, potentially, on the emergence of contingent communities that are not grounded in any clearly defined sense of identity. Rather than predefining the collective, *CC06* implicitly locates the ties that bind with aesthetic process, so that relations emerge within the exhibition; politics do not simply inform the exhibition, but are enacted through it at the level of material and sensate processes, and community is posited as something fluid, not yet named, potentially existing outside inscribed identity. In other words, community – collective enunciation – is an event realised through aesthetics.

Conceived within the terms of identity politics, exhibitions function to represent specific groups, and also to constitute spaces or conditions in which disenfranchised or new ‘hybrid’ identities might flourish. But the exhibiting of identity does not, in and of itself, enfranchise, or facilitate democratic participation. The institutional model of multiculturalism that simply promotes the representation of

diverse identities as add-ons to mainstream culture is in fact a fairly static one, which does not address the issue of interaction; hence, 'migrant' cultures might be acknowledged in their own terms, if not understood as impacting upon, participating within and radically changing the 'mainstream'. In other words, the 'migrant art' exhibition may exist within the institution in relative separation. In this regard, the recent turn to the dynamics of interconnection (an issue that is fundamental to both politics and aesthetics) might be understood as a response to the limitations of identity politics in both institutional and aesthetic terms – an attempt to move beyond and around identity; to literally shift 'identities' out of a static space into a dynamic set of relationships, whether through 'relational aesthetics', 'dialogical aesthetics' or other mobilisations of the concept of participation and democracy in art.

Curatorial practice is always a barometer of cultural theory, which it assimilates and turns over with the rapidity that new event design requires, but this trend should not simply be dismissed as the translation of theory into practice. In an important sense, the turn away from identity politics in art and exhibition practice allows a turn toward aesthetics in politics and marks a decisive break with the logic of art as representative of group identity. To some extent, the notion of national representation is now divorced from any concept of aesthetic expression (work in the national pavilions of the Venice Biennale, for example, rarely embodies national identity in any straightforward sense). The issue here is not one of content, however. Art may express a felt experience of community or belonging (even of a flag or national symbol²),

² For example, Jun Yang's video *HERO – this is WE*, exhibited in the 2005 Venice Biennale, draws parallels between the biennale and the Olympics as a show of national strength, tracing the appeal of the flag in nations like China and the US.

but aesthetic operations do not by nature proceed from pre-formed identity categories, nor coextend with the bounds of such categories. As Brian Massumi argues, expression is not an attribute of groups of persons, but a process-based inquiry that operates in its own terms (Massumi, 2002, 253).

It can be argued, of course, that the instrumental use of art – or its institutional cooption – need not compromise its aesthetic ambition. Exhibition titles, after all, often simply comprise generic descriptors of regions or countries, pointing to the diversity within, and I am reading *CC06* in this light. Giorgio Agamben, however, alerts us to the slippery slope of identity politics, which he suggests colludes unwittingly with the politics of state institutions. The state, he argues, is comfortable with an expression of identity in as much as coherently defined identities can be annexed or contained:

[T]he State can recognize any claim for identity – even that of a State identity within the State...What the State cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging (Agamben, 1993, 86).

In this way, multicultural policy is easily espoused by liberal democracies as a celebration of diverse cultural, ethnic and religious identities, united – and regulated – under one umbrella. Yet the rejection of identity as an organising trope makes for interesting post-colonial politics. It stands in opposition to the notion that decolonisation occasions an expression of pre-existing – or previously suppressed – bonds. Instead, as Jean-Luc Nancy has indicated, the emergence of decolonised communities necessitates a new way of thinking about community formation. Formation in this sense is the operative term, emphasising dynamic process (being-in-common at any given moment) rather than foundation. And it is this that contemporary aesthetic practice embodies –

particularly in the curatorial domain where the nature of a project is to work across and between artworks.

My argument, then, is this: that the shift from identity to relationality, and toward an exploration of communality as a process, is a key development in terms of political aesthetics. It is fundamentally a more *aesthetic* project than is identity politics insofar as it allows that a politics may be derived directly from aesthetic process and description—that aesthetics is a particular modality of the political rather than a form of mediation. The aesthetic ‘entity’ in question is the exhibition—the coming together of multiple artworks in a given event. To understand the politics of such an event in their full aesthetic terms we must look beyond the naming of the collective (the Commonwealth is a case in point) and start to conceive of connectivity in present and forward-looking terms. How do exhibitions occasion new collective enunciations with their own political effectivity?

An exhibition at the Witte de With (Rotterdam) in 2005 pursued this question by focussing on the interstices between works on display, and by implicitly proposing this space as one in which the coercive aspects of identity politics, fixed terms and injunctions might be circumvented. That exhibition’s aphoristic title, *Be What You Want But Stay Where You Are*, gestures on the one hand to Agamben’s theory of the state’s interest in identity (be what you want but stay within the boundaries of the state) and, on the other hand, to Hall’s characterisation of the colonial fantasy of separation (be what you want but stay outside). It thereby renders explicit the tacit understanding of many other contemporary exhibitions: communities are neither structured nor contained by governmental process. To this end, the question of what art emerges from any particular nation – or, for that matter, from a political aggregation like the Commonwealth – is meaningless. Not just because art (that might be social, cultural, political) is not an expression of nation, but because

its function within the relational space of an exhibition is greater than the representative one implied in such a model. Art is as much about what Agamben calls the 'coming community' as one that pre-exists or can cohere within the boundaries of nation. It doesn't offer up a representable condition of belonging so much as an account of process and movement: new sets of conjunctions, a surprise event.

Hence *CC06* inevitably became a show grounded in the expression of processes of migration, both as subjective experience and critical intervention – a far cry from the traditional showcase of national cultures that a 'Commonwealth exhibition' would once have implied. There are works in adjacent rooms that describe – with greater precision -- particular journeys in their subjective, historical or political dimensions (Isaac Julien's *Paradise Omeros* or Berni Searle's *Home and Away*) or works that explicitly trace migratory routes (Leon Cmielewski's and Josephine Starr's *Seeker* tracks the movement of people around the globe with animated data visuals), but no juxtaposition that is quite as exhilarating as that of Sally Smart's *Pirate* and Yinka Shonibare's *Reverend*. Both figures are routinely read as embodiments of postcoloniality, incorporating evidence of past encounters, yet they are not so much representations as interventions. They burst incongruously into a contemporary space – witty fantasies of postcolonial reappropriation; an instance of migratory aesthetics in action.

The pirate and the reverend embody migration as an animating force: a dynamic that activates relationships, cuts a swathe across history and reorients the works in the exhibition (energised by resonances at all levels: formal, material, political, sexual, rhetorical...). Smart's pirate generates a motif for seafaring exploration (colonial or migratory) that in the current context evokes the paranoia of a settler culture obsessed with border control and the spectre of boat people; threat is mockingly embodied in the exuberantly lawless

pirate and the skeletal bodies aboard her ship, playing off Shonibare's elegant headless torso, as well as Ex de Medici's resplendent watercolours of camouflaged weapons and skulls on the opposite wall.

The capture and transformation within this dynamic conjunction of a pervasive contemporary political sentiment generates a current of affect that runs through the exhibition. Fear, anxiety and suspicion – the negative affects, frequently mobilized in contemporary politics, are literally toyed with in these works. Yet these are not expressive works in any conventional sense; 'characters' are suggested purely by the animation of fabric, these affects are not sensations or emotions belonging to them or describing a response to a past event. Both the pirate and the Reverend are transient figures, seeming to emerge in the present space from their respective costume dramas; the skater gliding onto the ice, and the ship arriving at the shoreline provide the quintessential 'big entrance'—an overture to the spectacle. They both evince particular cultural histories and migratory routes, yet if their function here were merely to represent those histories, this would have made *CC06* a far less adventurous, overly museological endeavour. Instead, by the select inclusion of these dramatic costume pieces, *CC06* commences with a moment of pantomine splendour, creating an event out of bizarre constructions, not really representative of any particular place or people, summoned to this place from a divergent and fragmentary Commonwealth.

The affect generated and circulated through these works does not arise from historical narrative in this sense. It is largely a function of the exhibition's imbrication in the contemporary. How can we think about migration, arrival by sea, here in contemporary Australia without confronting the reality of the refugee situation, and a politics tempered by "terror"? Hence, the orchestration of work by Shonibare, Smart, De Medici, constitutes vectors for emotion that is

generated around borders and migration. Rather than any claim to document the real, it is this capacity to activate and channel affect that gives the exhibition its political edge.

Collective enunciation and surprise

The question of how we deal with the fear, anxiety and paranoia at large in contemporary politics is a pressing one for artists and theorists. It is not enough to mock and deride, or to substitute rationality for affect, since paranoia is an operative politics—a way of reading with strategic implications, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has demonstrated. It is marked, she notes, by “a distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive, averse to all surprise”; characterised by an extreme faith in knowing as exposure, and hence, in rigid historiographic principles (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003, 146). Insofar as it looks forward, it identifies only threat—the bad surprise. Everything must be foreseen, traced to its antecedent causes or predicted and prevented (hence the political ascendancy of the ‘precautionary’ principle as a rationale for the pre-emptive strike) (Bennett, forthcoming). Hope, Sedgwick argues, emerges from relinquishing the paranoid anxiety that no horror shall ever come “as new”, and from the energies of organising the fragments and part objects one encounters and creates. These are the very energies that are engaged by the material structure of an exhibition. Curatorial practice, in this sense, might be understood as the organization of fragments into new assemblages—structures that create space to realise not only that the future can be different from the present, but that the past might have unfolded differently (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003, 146). Aesthetics—and particularly migratory aesthetics—thus has a more complex relationship to temporality and to the impetus for truth. An expression of movement within the faultlines of inhospitable territories, migratory aesthetics is not foreboding like the paranoid imaginary. By nature, it embodies a process

of remaking, flux and mutation that recognises the lineaments of other possibilities. Exhibitions like *CC06* or *2Move* exhibit the knowledge that surprise may be either bad (traumatic) or good. As much as the paranoid imagination is relentlessly bleak, migratory aesthetics seeks out the new, even as it relates the darkest stories of colonization, division and exclusion. In other words, although “it” is not a singular movement, its inherent qualities of movement and transition are at odds with the paranoid structural aversion to surprise—to a future unknown.

I am discussing migratory aesthetics here as something that is realised as an event—a collective enunciation—within a given exhibition. Hence, the curatorial process entails orchestrating a formal dynamic in order for assemblages and their multiple relationalities to cohere. Meaning emerges from aesthetic or formal resonance operating across works and in the interplay with the politics of the moment. The works under discussion do not seek to “represent” the contemporary political scene, but in a particular configuration absorb and channel a politics overshadowed by the refugee crisis, which then finds affective resonance in other pieces: poetic allegories of migration and settlement, such as John Gillies’ *Divide* (a black and white video evoking colonial Australia and the biblical journey into Canaan), operating in a more subdued register to describe the upheaval and turmoil, flowing inexorably – and exponentially – from displacement. Such work grounds the exuberant affect of the Shonibare/Smart room so that the high point of theatricality does not simply exhilarate but intensifies and subsides as it resonates with events staged elsewhere.

Real migratory stories, real histories of invasion, trauma, and the violence of separation are invoked at different points in the exhibition. What place is there, ultimately, for fantasy characters, or for the theatricality of Shonibare’s masked ball in this scenario? When does the politics of

aestheticisation diminish by comparison with the documentary style with its self-evident relation to the real? The answer might be—paradoxically—when it masquerades as realism and representation—or lays claim to truth. More specifically, in this context, when it stands a part from the larger collectivity as an end in itself. Here the pirate and the reverend are themselves part objects in an assemblage that allows us to imagine that the colonial past might have been otherwise. The fanfare they engender immediately debunks any claim to serious history writing, displacing our engagement onto a more complex interplay of affect that generates transversal links with other works. They are all about surprise.

The success of this curatorial juxtaposition lies in the fact that meaning arises from aesthetic process, as opposed to simply content or form. Unifying work at the level of content leads inevitably toward didacticism—an insistence on meaning and a privileging of interpretation over aesthetic experience. On the other hand, formalist curating is apt to void work of particular and operative meaning (politics) too readily, promoting pan cultural visual resonance at the expense of cultural specificity. This has been a tension in play ever since the arena of contemporary art became 'global' rather than merely 'western'. The landmark exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* (Paris, 1989) was a watershed in this regard, combining contemporary practice from diverse cultural traditions. Yet its curator Jean Hubert Martin was widely criticised for certain juxtapositions: the sand drawings performed by Yuendumu Aboriginal people in a space dominated by Richard Long's mud drawing, for example. Quite a part from the implied hierarchy of the 'hang', such works were imbued with a monumental (and representative) status, 'talking to each other' across a cultural divide. Almost two decades later, progressive curators readily play upon such material connections. *Documenta 12* (Kassel, 2007) works

precisely in these terms: a Russian fountain made from salt, installed alongside a Chinese wax waterfall or porcelain wave; a Japanese bondage video in sight of the rope frame of a dance troop—formal ensembles, each embedded with multiple political and cultural significations, prompting different interpretative possibilities as they are evoked in various constellations. Here there is no longer any suggestion of a universal symbolism—a pan-culturalism reduced to its formal components so that it is voided of cultural meaning.

I would argue that in an exhibition like *Documenta 12*, relationality is thought through not just at the level of theme but in terms of a dynamic flow that works on something immanent in the artwork itself but that is activated by connection. In describing this connection we should avoid replacing form and content designations with an account of relationality that simply privileges audience encounter at the level of individual interactivity. The key issue is how works are activated in such a way as to produce a collective enunciation—a politics of the contemporary. The difference, I think, between *Magiciens de la terre* and either *Documenta 12* or *CC06*, for example, is the extent to which relationality in aesthetics is understood as a political expression in the moment. By this I mean as a temporal unfolding or coextension of diverse works that envelops and conduct a politics of the present.

There is a fine line here that reflects Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between major and minor literature. "Living and writing, art and life, are opposed only from the point of view of major literature" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, 41), because major work is, within the terms of its institutionalisation, profoundly individuated. However social or personal, it is configured as an exceptional expression and thereby removed from the sphere of the collective. This is what happens when 'great' works in their own right are juxtaposed; they affirm their own authority and allow viewers

to make only visual or interpretative connections. A new mode of curatorial practice—of which *Documenta 12* is a prime example—might recast work as minoritarian by locating it in a less competitive environment where it can function as part of a collective enunciation. The key dimension to this process is not simply to allow in 'life' as either documentary representation or spectator interaction. It is to understand contemporary art as existing and operating within the contemporary—so that the exhibiting space is always an extension of the outside: the local politics, the world. Politics comes from the configuration of art in this unbounded contemporary space, rather than from institutional designation: making the exhibition contemporary, rather than institutionalising contemporary art.

In this sense the politics of art is always contingent rather than predetermined or foreclosed. In response to the question of how art propounds a politics, Ranciere has argued that, "It is necessary to reverse the way in which the problem is generally formulated. It is up to the various forms of politics to appropriate for their proper use, the modes of presentation or the means of establishing explanatory sequences produced by artistic practices rather than the other way around" (Ranciere, 2004). As I have argued elsewhere, this entails that the event in art is constituted as a kind of virtual event, amenable to different actualities (Bennett, 2005). In other words, rather than merely giving account of an event that has already happened (and which may have informed the work's production and form), it serves to generate a set of possibilities, which may in turn inform political thinking in regard to particular circumstances. This level of political operativity may be activated (or conversely, deadened) when work is staged in different configurations in different locations.

Perhaps in some sense the 'test' of contemporary art – of its contemporaneity – is its capacity to be invested in this sense; to constitute vectors that link events in a new

configuration. 'Migratory' art is exemplary in this regard insofar as it embodies movement and transition, making aesthetics political, by shifting it—literally mobilizing it—into new sets of relations. This politics of possibility rests on a dynamic conception of relationality in art as something more than the closed circuits of interactivity: relationality as always contemporary, as enfolding 'life' in the sense that minor literature is part of a collective fabric rather than separable art sphere. Works in an exhibition are, in this way, not simply juxtaposed and rendered subject to comparative analysis, but simultaneously mobilised. *CC06* encompasses the history of global migration: movement across a vast area, spanning five continents, and the decades since former colonies achieved independence. Within this, it comprises an orchestration of simultaneous movement, of a collective that has no existence, no visibility. The question is not what this is, what political entity gave rise to this coming together, but what this does, collectively in the present. Politics is not written into these works but arises from aesthetic dynamics: from a collective enunciation unbound to a collective. To this end, art theoretical analysis needs to offer precise account of the nature of aesthetic perception, of the substance of connection and the flow of affect.

Aesthetics

Here, I am extending the title concept of Mieke Bal and Miguel Hernandez-Navarro's exhibition *Migratory Aesthetics* to describe another show, *CC06*, reading that title as indicative of a wider phenomenon in contemporary art. *Migratory Aesthetics* announces itself as an operative concept rather than a generic descriptor – a value-added concept that arises from the collected artworks and the connections between them. This tracing of a concept in aesthetic practice reprises one of Bal's recurrent quests to derive thought *from* art; to treat art, not as an object of cultural studies, but as a mode of doing cultural

studies, and crucially, of setting the terms of a cultural inquiry (Bal, 2000). More than the sum of artworks about migration, Migratory Aesthetics invokes aesthetics in the strong sense, as an epistemic project, rather than simply in the weaker sense, implying the aesthetic treatment of objects.

To qualify aesthetics as migratory is to evoke an aesthetics conditioned by migration. Yet within contemporary art discourse, there is a surprising reticence to conceive of aesthetics – the theory of aesthetic form, dynamics, behaviour and perception – as tempered by cultural shifts. Art itself has a well-defined relationship to contemporaneity (modernism, after all, implies its embodiment). Hence, the overlapping themes of migration, globalization and postcoloniality are predominant in many biennales and major international art exhibitions of the past decade and a half. Yet aesthetics – the discourse that could/should make general claims (based on the specifics of art's engagement) for what the aesthetic contributes to an understanding of contemporary culture – has been curtailed by an art theoretical tendency to entrench a form-content distinction that construes social and political issues as content matters, antithetical to the formal concerns of aesthetics. To the extent that this view prevails, art theory has failed to elaborate an aesthetics that would locate politics in the very particularity of art's mode of expression.

As Isobel Armstrong has shown, however, the purist conception of aesthetics that underpins this distinction is the unfortunate legacy of a more widespread 'anti-aesthetic' turn in theoretical writing (Armstrong, 2000). In art history, the so-called 'anti-aesthetic' period of postmodernism has prompted a 'return' to aesthetics, often narrowly conceived as a return to 'beauty' in art and art discourse. There is reason to be suspicious of the anti-aesthetic tag insofar as the diversity sanctioned by postmodernism simply allowed for a proliferation of aesthetics. Judgements of taste became relative; aesthetics, a crowded space that embraced the market,

popular culture, diversity. Hence, the idea that art theory might, after a period of social mixing, return to a purified aesthetics, itself somehow untouched by cultural change is untenable. If aesthetics is to be more than a nostalgic refuge for conservative art theory, it has to function with greater impurity and within what Deleuze and Guattari term the “cramped space” of contemporary culture; that is, not the space made available within the institution for major art but the lived space, in which we encounter exclusion, confinement, marginalisation, difference and change (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986). A project that conceives of aesthetics as migratory – as adaptive and mutable – is an important challenge, necessitating a turn to an expanded conception of aesthetics as an epistemic inquiry.

Aesthetics is, by definition, concerned with what Baumgarten termed ‘sensitive’ or ‘sensuous knowledge’ – a faculty of perception and thus a means of apprehending the world (Baumgarten, 1970 [1758]).³ As a primary encounter, unconstrained by the categories, methods and demarcations of other disciplines and practices, aesthetic perception is a unique non-scientific basis for inquiry. It does not take up the terms of current institutionalised analysis or align its expressions with pre-existing categories; it excavates often underlying perceptions and affects, direct engagements with the world in its uncategorized ‘whateverness’, to use Agamben’s term (Agamben, 1993, 86). At this level of sensory encounter, ascriptions of national or group identity are apt to fall away, even as they produce ‘wounded attachments’ (in Wendy Brown’s phrase) and residual or unconscious emotional effects. The point of pursuing the epistemic possibilities of aesthetic perception is not, then, to illustrate the propositions of science and sociology – to underwrite divisions of nations,

³ Baumgarten gave the discipline its name, deriving it from the Greek *aisthanomai*, meaning perception by means of the senses.

people or identities (positive or negative) – but to establish another way of knowing, and hence another ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Ranciere, 2004). It is at this level that aesthetics is political intervention, reorganising affects to redetermine a perceptual landscape.

If the art of identity politics was pursued as a self-legitimizing practice, aesthetics is at variance with this insofar as it cuts through identity in the process of tracing the operations of perception. For this reason, migratory aesthetics cannot be synonymous with art about migration, or art by migrants (though it may of course encapsulate both). This is not to say that it disregards the latter in any sense; rather that aesthetics must serve art more effectively by making the general case and configuring the political through the aesthetic by describing the particularity of what art does.

What then, can migratory aesthetics – an exploration of sensory perception conditioned by migration – deliver in addition to accounts of particular migrations or indeed of identities?

This is, in a sense, why I choose to focus on *CC06*, an exhibition that enacts migratory aesthetics, but does not label itself as such nor even claim to ‘represent’ accounts of migration. In this instance, the cumulative effect of the aesthetic engagement with migration is to engender a politics of contemporary culture as ‘migrant’; that is, a culture transformed by migration but emphatically not a separable minority culture. In this arena, pressing concerns (the refugee issue, ‘multicultural’ politics and contemporary divisions, as well as fundamental issues of democratic participation) emerge *through* the aesthetic analysis, as it were.

One of the interesting things about *CC06* was how work that might be corralled under the ‘topic’ of war and terror – the politics of the moment – emerges readily from ‘migratory’ art as a natural outgrowth. By *not* naming art as

‘migrant’ or as ‘about war and terror’ the exhibition avoided the kind of thematization that overdetermines the content of work, instead allowing us to see how an aesthetic method gives rise to a broad-based politics of the contemporary. This is an important way to think about the epistemic possibilities of exhibition practice.

More specifically, if there is a paranoid style in contemporary global politics, we might see the aesthetic as structurally suited to a systematic refusal of this strategy. Can aesthetic experimentation generate models by which we can understand cultural movements that do not allow themselves to be predicted on identity politics? This is an urgent political project in a context where clashes sparked by ethnic and racial divisions are often deemed as ‘unforeseen’, or as inexplicable irruptions – actually blind-spots – in a ‘multicultural’ state, which cannot adequately conceptualise contingent relations. If ‘paranoid politics’ reacts to the experience of the unforeseen in ways that seek to reduce the event—and the behaviour of those involved—to a predictable formula, a more aesthetically inclined politics might develop more complex understandings of cultural movements and relations, based on a direct engagement with unpredictability.

The ‘event’ status of an exhibition very often militates against the notion of art as ‘inquiry’ or contribution to knowledge insofar as institutions like galleries and biennales are driven always to look for the next new theme. Hence there is a rapid turnover of topics and tropes, none of which are subjected to the sustained and cumulative development that characterises academic research (although rapid filtration sometimes has its own advantages). But aesthetic inquiry properly conceived (and unconstrained by an imposed theme or topic) does enable the constitution of an enduring thread of knowledge. Without needing to ‘claim’ the subject of terror, migratory aesthetics (as a concept grounded in critical art and exhibition practice) provides something akin to a

methodological foundation – a cultural genealogy that leads from the analysis of past migrations into a present politics where the perceptual and affective relations surrounding migration flow directly into realpolitik and lived experience. This is how aesthetic resonance works (as I have argued elsewhere, regarding the question of how work on conflict and trauma may translate into different contexts) -- not through similarities in semantic content or even form but through a depth engagement at the level of the political aesthetic as a true method of inquiry (Bennett, 2005; 2006, 67–81). In this sense, it is important to acknowledge relational aesthetics as more than a thematic interlude.

Shared exposure: being-in-common

CC06 – the appellation referencing a shared identity that isn't one – serves as a case study revealing what might remain once the notional bonds of shared identity are discarded. The tagline of the 2006 Commonwealth Games was, as it happened, 'united by the moment' – an uplifting marketing slogan that unwittingly alluded to the lack of any enduring Commonwealth community. This image of a fleeting togetherness – 'a relation without a relation' (Nancy) – is echoed in contemporary theory where it emerges – in Nancy's work, in particular – as a sign of ethical possibility. The ineffability of a 'being in common' that does not cohere as a representable identity may, however, require aesthetics or art to realize it as an ethical or political concept. Something banal and unnoticed in daily life becomes conceivable in the domain of the aesthetic, which can modulate the tenor of an encounter to examine affective relations. Nancy conjures the utterly mundane image of 'passengers in the same train compartment' who are simply seated next to each other: *together but not linked*: 'They are between the disintegration of the "crowd" and the aggregation of the group...exposed simultaneously to a relationship and an absence of

relationship' (Nancy, 1991, 7). This evocation of a communal experience beyond the realm of the named community points to a quintessential modern, predominantly urban condition, constituted by stranger-encounters as much as by familiar relations; a dislocated experience, rather than a sedentary one, where one is in transit as much as at home. But unlike the conspicuous isolation of the modernist subject, embodied in the figure of the *flâneur*, strolling alone within a crowd, here the emphasis is on the condition of community that subsists within this state of affairs. In the train compartment there is an unavoidable encounter with the strangeness and difference of others, however temporary this encounter may be. The sense of 'being with' entailed in this mass transit experience is literally poised *between*, in that zone beyond the affiliations of work, home and various destinations, but it is nonetheless an interface: a place in which we negotiate being with others in a physical, emotional and ethical sense.

Terror attacks in London and Madrid have recently invested the image of the mass transit train as a site of shared or common exposure with more solidity than Nancy's metaphor originally contained. The extraordinary traumatic event is often the occasion for community expression. But the train is, in a very real sense, the site where a politics of migration—and of paranoia—play out, both in fleeting perceptions and in the sense of retributory violence and violation. In the name of security and vigilance, we are enjoined to regard the passengers in our train compartment with suspicion. This has led Shilpa Gupta, a participant in *CC06*, to stage interactive performances in trains (*Blame*, 2002–03). She wanders through train carriages, selling to passengers her Blame bottles, full of simulated blood, with a label reading 'Blame® BLAMING YOU MAKES ME FEEL SO GOOD'. This discursive engagement is neither didactic nor sentimental; it is not about inducing an idealised feeling of togetherness. Rather, Gupta acknowledges the degree to which the politics

of *ressentiment* – the extreme of identity politics – urgently requires both analysis and intervention at the level of affect. *Ressentiment* (vengefulness) is defined by Nietzsche in terms of a desire to deaden pain by means of affect – through the production of a more violent emotion, directed outward:

Every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering, more exactly, an agent; still more specifically a guilty agent who is susceptible to suffering – in short, some living thing upon which he can on some pretext or other, vent his affects, actually or in effigy (Nietzsche, 1989; Brown, 1995, 214).

After the London Tube bombings thousands of people posted ‘we’re not afraid’ messages (pictures – often of themselves in various public locations – with versions of that slogan added) on a website www.werenotafraid.com. It wasn’t that people really *were*’t afraid; they were, of course, more anxious than ever, but what is significant is how they took recourse in an aesthetic strategy – aesthetic by virtue of operating directly on affect. The We’re Not Afraid site can be read as a refusal of *ressentiment*, a means of countering not just the threat of terror but the manipulation of affect that has characterised the PR component of the War on Terror.⁴ It elicits a defiance based not in retribution or negative affect, but in the spontaneous generation of a community united simply in exposure.

This is, in Kosofsky Sedgwick’s terminology, a “reparative” rather than “paranoid” aesthetics. “Paranoid knowing” insists on knowledge in the form of exposure. It is based on a hermeneutics of suspicion that seeks always to

⁴ The project is described as follows: “*We’re not afraid* is an outlet for the global community to speak out against the acts of terror that have struck London, Madrid, New York, Baghdad, Basra, Tikrit, Gaza, Tel-Aviv, Afghanistan, Bali, and against the atrocities occurring in cities around the world each and every day. It is a worldwide action for people not willing to be cowed by terrorism and fear mongering.” Internet, <<http://www.werenotafraid.com/about.html>>, accessed January 19, 2007.

reveal underlying truth, placing its faith in the act of revelation and unveiling. This is where aesthetics and the paranoid or documentary endeavour part company methodologically. Paranoid politics is anti-theatrical, relentlessly documentary and narrative. As I have previously argued, however, the documentary as exposé has limited aesthetic appeal and potency, since it relies (paradoxically) on the inherent drama of revelation and on the ready identification of a lie (Bennett, forthcoming). Evil is generally more complex than this; it rarely reduces to the monumental lie, the singular deceitful act, amenable to subsequent representation. Thus, exposure as a tactic—a way of reading—is to be used sparingly. And then only when the pros and cons of its paranoid determination are recognized. The politics of aesthetics redirects us away from an obsession with access to the truth of what really happened (as the only basis for political action), toward the imaginative development of other possibilities (past and future). Exposure, in this regime, is not a truth condition but a collective shock. This is the essence of *werenotafraid.com*—the being-in-common that is the result of a being-in-shock; not a disavowal but a response to the experience of being caught out, surprised by the unimaginable.

The mobilisation of ‘effigies’ (the venting of vengeful affects in Nietzsche’s terms) rests on some imagined separation of home and beyond – and it is this bounded, ‘secured’ sense of community and of identity that a politicised migratory aesthetics (as well as the spontaneous recognition of shared exposure in an aesthetic domain) undermines on various flanks. The contemporary community described by Nancy collapses any such division; risk and exposure attach to the very experience of being-in-common, and there is no home away from all this to which we can retreat. Kim Beom’s witty *Hometown* (shown in the Korean pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale) is a timely intervention in this regard. An installation, comprising artifacts from a mythical town in a

remote Korean mountain region, is accompanied by a handbook, designed for those who feel the need for a hometown narrative for use in social conversation. This comes complete with images and information on geography and population, and useful tips for foreigners who might find it difficult to account for their Korean background. Such work debunks the fetishization of the migrant story as something that can be packaged and coveted from outside – and, in this context, reminds us that we may need to face up to the challenge of talking about social relations without the representable trappings of identity.

This is perhaps one of the principal challenges of contemporaneity – and of the politics of the event, characterized by changing sets of relations (social, religious, political allegiances that arise from particular political conditions, for example) rather than fixed affiliations (Bennett, 2005). And in the absence of identity attributes that enable us to firmly locate affiliations, we are forced to consider how these are constituted through affects and perceptions, some entrenched, some volatile, some malleable. If the question of relations ‘beyond identity’ is an important dimension of political inquiry, it is an area in which aesthetics may prove itself indispensable.

This is not to say that migratory aesthetics is unconcerned with the texture of migrant stories, nor that it is characterized by a singular approach. Clearly there is immense diversity in what might collectively constitute migratory aesthetics – and some of the most influential contemporary art of recent times has dealt with very specific events of border control (Multiplicity’s work, for example), as much as with imagined alternatives. At the same time, the metaphor of ‘traffic’ has been widely evoked to describe more fluid and tenuous forms of community engagement, as well as a more free ranging approach to democratic participation (the *Asian Traffic* exhibitions that have toured the Asia-Pacific

region exemplify this) (Bennett, 2006).⁵ Migratory aesthetics encompasses such an engagement with the texture of movement at a micro (sensory) level and at a macro (transnational) level. It embodies 'exodus', in Virno's sense of a creative flight from the state toward alternative community formations (Virno, 2004), but combines the image of exit or departure with an elaboration of movement across new territory—of an arrival, however provisional.

Migratory Aesthetics is less a style than a strategy: a transitional politics. To this end, it is essentially hybrid. The affective potency of *CC06* (as with recent *Documentas*) lay in the recasting of documentary work alongside other aesthetic practice in a creative curatorial politics that functions as a 'shock to thought'—the surprise engendered through unexpected collision. To this end, works like the pirate ship and Shonibare's costume pieces vaunt their theatricality and their capacity to upset and invert tradition. Yet they are effective in this context only to the extent that they are part of a collective assemblage, extracting a new politics out of the shards of an old defunct collectivity. This is what migratory aesthetics can do at its best—what aesthetics can become under the impact of migration. If it can open up new lines of inquiry into contemporary culture, and carve out a dynamic alternative to the stultified, institutionalised forms of multiculturalism that seem often to serve only institutional agendas, we have the essence of a genuinely practical, radical aesthetics.

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⁵ *Asian Traffic* originated at the Asia Australia Arts Centre in Sydney, an organization with an explicit commitment to the 'representation' of migrant groups. *Asian Traffic*, and the subsequent *Open Letter* project, reconfigured this agenda in more explicitly relational terms.

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