

Name Calling

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While I wish to discuss ideas about diaspora in general, I will more specifically use examples about Asian America, since the term "Asian American" still resonates within popular usage as an indicator of foreignness, *Asian American*; whereas the term "African American"—by reason of the forced break with Africa and the traumatizing history of slavery particular to America—privileges the site of America geographically, historically, politically, and aesthetically: *African American*.

The term "Asian American" (AsAm) and the arts associated with it might seem to be anachronisms from the late 1980s and early '90s, much as feminist art is often dismissed as a phenomenon of the '70s. This does not of course mean that art by AsAm artists or by women artists has ceased to be produced; it just goes under a different name, or, more accurately, resists a specific naming by infiltrating the mainstream nirvana of universalist "art". Just as the strategy of naming or self-naming and demanding the use of one's name is a political response—"What's my name?," Muhammad Ali would taunt his opponents in the ring, after he had changed his name from Cassius Clay—so passing as unnamed or refusing to be named is equally strategic.¹ To pass as simply an "artist" is itself a response to naming's failure or perceived failure to cast visibility on the practices indicated by the names, rather than on the names only: for example, on the diasporic as a strategy or practice rather than as an identity. Here also I wish to emphasize that I mean not only "oppositional" or so-called minority practices but also those practices that operate within the "mainstream" to reveal its parochialism.

If one intention of multiculturalism was to confer visibility or to attain recognition from the center or mainstream (and this was by no means the only or overriding goal), then that role has been usurped by the racialized body's achievement of a *hypervisibility* through commodification. The black body, in the guises of the entertainer, the athlete, and more recently the gangsta, sells; difference is not only assimilated and filtered into the center but is actively promoted as a tenet of the marketplace. Naming difference only as a question of surface markings, with an undertone of "Under the skin, we all *want* the same," instead of seeing difference as dialectically constructed, is, in the words of Stuart Hall, difference that doesn't make a difference.

Yet what continuing use is there in maintaining the peripheral category of "diaspora"? And what exactly is diasporic art (with its components of Jewish, Asian, African, etc.)? Is it an art that specifically addresses a diasporic "experience"? Is it any art that is produced by Americans of "other" descent (that is, by the majority of Americans)? Who is (or isn't) a diasporic artist? And especially in relation to the marketplace, is it colluding with one's own marginalization and unmarketability to function under these umbrellas? (The terms under which such nomenclature functions are also rapidly changing, as increased travel and developing communications technologies allow for more fluid identifications—while preserving the terminology of territorial ownership, such as the Internet's "domains" and "addresses.")

One could sidestep such slippery terrain by responding that the strategies of diasporic art, like those of multiculturalism, have merely outlived their usefulness, and that, now that the margins are no longer marginal, it is simply time to move on. I would

happily agree with this abandonment except that it leaves questions unanswered, exclusionary practices intact, and vistas yet to explore that still require some kind of model or platform from which they can be at least addressed, even if not resolved.

While these questions remain important, they also divert from other, preceding issues that need clarification. It is an observation rather than a criticism to note that the history of Euro-American art is one of appropriation, syncretism, and hybridity. This is equally true of any art, from any location on the globe, and from any time period. While this might seem so obvious as to be barely worth mentioning, it is hardly a fact that one might glean from mainstream curatorial and critical practices. The few galleries, museums, and exhibitions that do exhibit a broad range of artists working outside of, against, or critically of identities of whiteness tend to require that those artists display their difference and distance from that presumed norm, thereby performing equally problematic constructions of cultural authenticity. Space is also allocated to certain appearances of hybridity, and particularly to those artists who work from a "traditional" aesthetic but who "update" it with a knowingly "Western" (i.e., "liberated") content, thereby killing and displaying the two birds of difference and authenticity with the one stone of Western freedoms.

Until very recently, contemporary Asian art was routinely dismissed as being derivative of the West (and "contemporary African art" routinely dismissed as oxymoronic). Yet one is unlikely to hear the admonition that John Cage, say, is too derivative of Zen Buddhism, or that Jackson Pollock is too derivative of Navaho sand painters, or Henri Matisse of Islamic design, or, the most obvious, that Pablo Picasso is too derivative of African masks. Of course it would be absurd to read the work of these four individuals only in relation to their influences, yet common wisdom would have it that these and other Euro-American artists have been and continue to be "inspired" by kernels of primal authenticity found in otherwise barren terrain, and which, through their own heroic efforts, they have transplanted and nurtured to full blossom. What is significant about these and numerous similar examples is that the influence is not perceived as stemming from a contemporary, equivalent, even modernist practice but from a practice located in the past, or existing outside time ("timeless"). David Clarke has recently suggested that the Asian influence on American art has never been fully recognized in part because Clement Greenberg's willfully myopic account of U.S. modernism manfully taking over the reins from European modernism had no place for the somewhat "feminine" influences of Asia.²

The feminization of Asia and its denial as already hybrid are, yes, orientalist, imperialist, and ultimately racist, but that denial's attraction and continued currency are also vested in the Euro-American—particularly the metropolitan Euro-American—hunger for a lost authenticity that an orientalized Asia represents and can satisfy. The capacity to orientalize is socially endemic, and AsAm artists themselves run this risk: those who have emigrated from Asia at an early age may have to base their knowledge on their own or their parents' memories, in either case of a moment passed or one fixed in time. Their subsequent knowledge of Asia, too, may be gleaned through the orientalizing lens of the West, to the extent that their work may reflect the idea of a past Asia and look more "Asian" than anything produced in Asia today.

Similarly, the primitivizing of Africa (with the exception of the Hellenic appropriation of Egypt) masks the fact of African civilizations past and present, and therefore also offers the lure of authentic experience without the Asian guilt of historical legacy. The Maasai, for example, in their "traditional" *shukas* and beadwork, are the poster savages of East African tourism, promising authenticity, timelessness, otherness, and a certain African untameability—all the qualities that the tourist desperately seeks in the

"safari experience." As symbols of Maasai-ness and hence Africanness, however, the shukas are derived from Scottish tartans, and the beads from trade at first with white missionaries and settlers and now with Eastern Europe. Hybridity and international exchange are reconfigured as cultural purity and economic dependence, not only for the Maasai but for the nations they have come to represent. (These configurations of cultural and economic inequity bear comparison with the earlier examples given of Euro-American artists and their "influences.")

What is of value in the terminology of diaspora (and Asian/African/etc. America) is the hybrid implication of ambivalence, or perhaps more accurately multivalency: a refusal to be fixed within the boundaries of only one site, since its locations are always provisional. By this I don't mean to suggest the tragic fish-out-of-water dislocation of "caught between two cultures" that is so beloved of liberal paternalism. No, I mean a proviso both here *and* there—an abundance rather than a lack. Or, stated another way, the lack comes when only one site, one lineage, is considered, or when one is privileged over the other. After all, any construction of identity is predicated not only upon what one is but upon what one is not. There is a further step to this equation: the self is constructed from where one is and from where one sees, and also from where one is not and what one fails to see. Location is a primary factor for identification, since the awareness of one's physical body occupying a given space, and parameters of racialized skin, is intrinsic to identity formation. (This location/identity is both sited, in that it is the center from which one experiences the world, and always transient as one experiences the world.) While these are psychoanalytic truisms—that any claim to identity is a negotiated amalgam of the Self *and* the Other, Here *and* There—their adoption as artistic and critical strategies have the potential to be richly productive. The logic of diaspora—a logic that has radical repercussions—is that the diasporic subject makes explicit the identification as both Self *and* Other, Here *and* There, refusing to situate those identifications fully in any one location.

The term "AsAm" is a declaration of investment in both sites, and furthermore an investment in both locations being linked: the immediate evidence of that linkage being the work and the physical bodies of the artists themselves. I emphasize the corporeal since I do not fully embrace the romantic but nevertheless attractive idea of the Teflon-skinned, rootless nomad; we are shaped through or at least marked by our locations and by our passage through them (and here I include the body as a location that is itself physically changing and transient). The Self is in constant formation through discursive intersections of and with location; and both Self and "location" are constructed as much through fantasy and desire as through physicality.

In this particular political moment, the declaration of hybridity/investment is, I think, a necessary one. While symbolic and without the same significant consequences, it brings to mind the conviction of those Americans and Europeans who have recently intervened in target zones alongside Iraqi and Palestinian civilians. When the American administration, on the other hand, can deny a hybrid identity and declare itself a singularity—by opting out of international treaties, tribunals, and global consensus—then this call, as Americans, to duality, to provisionality, to ambivalence, to identifying with and *as* the Other, with *There* as much as *Here*, becomes a pointedly political gesture. Yes, we are civilians subject to and fearful of terrorism, but we are also civilians subject to militarism and *state* terrorism, whether it is euphemistically worded as "sanctions," "smart bombs," or "homeland security."

Further, given the recent visibility of Asian artists, the growth of Asian cities as thriving art centers, increased mobility, and the comparative internationalization of the art "world," AsAm artists now have a choice of performance sites, as it were. Some

live in multiple locations, commuting between one continent and another for professional reasons. These artists can perform "Americanness" and "Asianness," as well as neither-one-but-both. The two former choices suggest passing, attempted infiltrations that carry the constant anxiety of being uncovered. (With my hybrid European name and Californianized British accent, as long as people don't meet me and we conduct our business by mail or phone, I can pass for many things, depending on the ignorance of the other party; in person my dark skin narrows the range of my possible masquerades, though what I "am"—an Americanized British Luso-Indo-African—also affords me a certain license. While I might lightly trumpet this hybrid pedigree, or pedigreed hybridity, I am also quick to note that my case is the norm in this world of mass migrations.)

The only viable option against the self-denials of passing is to assume a hybrid identity that claims multiple locations, in my case those of Asia, Africa, Europe, *and* America. This multiple claim is a necessary counter to the particular nationalisms, fundamentalisms, and xenophobias produced in each of the sites. The value of diasporic artists is not simply that they construct for themselves new identities, which trickle down into the societies around them, but that they also expose and deconstruct those preexisting identities that would otherwise remain naturalized under the cloak of the nation.

The world is such that it is no longer sufficient to ask one's antagonist, "What's my name?" The question has to be, "What are my names?" Of course the question remains strategic and rhetorical, since the provisionality and ambivalence of the answers in turn force one always to be at least one step ahead of one's naming.

1. For those marked by "slave" names—Cassius Clay—or by their colonial passage—Allan deSouza—their naming serves to dislocate, in that it privileges the master or colonizing strand of the geographic, historical, cultural, and political. The erasure of the enslaved and colonized is never complete, since the name is hybridized precisely by having been formed through the colonial encounter.
2. David Clarke, "Contemporary Asian Art and Its Western Reception," *Third Text* 16, no. 3 (2002): 237–42.