Convergence 1996

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The Aesthetic, Political and Ethical Issues in Cross-cultural Art

Mysore, India

by Richard Fung

It was billed as Convergence 1996; divergence would have been more apt. What was slated as a tri-national conversation on "The Aesthetic, Political and Ethical Issues in Cross-cultural Art," featuring postcolonial superstars Gayatri Spivak and Trinh T. Minh-ha, ended up fractious and frustrating, and divaless. But still, this February about twenty Canadian artists, academics and curators joined colleagues from India and the United States (and a single Australian participant) for five intense days in Mysore, India. And for all its deficiencies, it would be unfair and untrue to describe this gathering as a waste of time. As a seasoned conference queen, I've long ago decided that what makes or breaks it at such events is only partly a matter of the formal sessions; it's equally about the more intimate conversations that take place at coffee breaks and dinners, and it's about who's there. At Convergence 1996, there were some great minds and great art (in video and slides), and for me the conference presented a rare opportunity to interact with artists and critics in another part of the globe. In both its successes and its failures, Convergence 1996 offered a chance to experience, ponder and learn from the problems, possibilities and assumptions of transnational interactions.

Organized by the Centre for Cultures, Technologies and the Environment (CCTE), Convergence 1996 was really a kind of family effort: the conference organizers Chandrabhanu Pattanayak (vice-president) and Vibha Sharma (secretary) are also life partners who divide their time between Montreal and Mysore, where the CCTE offices are housed in the Pattanayak homes; the conference proceedings took place at the Southern Regional Language Centre Auditorium, apparently garnered through connections from Dr. D.P. Pattanayak, Chandrabhanu's father and a noted linguist; the three Pattanayaks programmed the Indian and Canadian elements of the conference and chaired all of the meetings, with the addition of Idaho State University professor Paul Tate who, apparently responding to a listing on the Internet, organized the American contingent. (Here again a family theme was evident as several of the U.S. presenters were married to each other.) Such a visible concentration of power and responsibility meant that the Pattanayaks shouldered most of the work, and all of the blame whenever things went wrong.

And there was a lot to criticize. From the initial material the CCTE and Convergence 1996 appeared well-organized, well-connected and full of resources. The outline of events promised keynotes, "white papers," art presentations, discussions, studio space and other facilities for collaborations among participating artists. Selected papers from the conference were to be published in an Indian and a North American journal. As February approached I became increasingly worried that I still didn't know what context I was to speak in: lecture, workshop, panel? If so, who were the other presenters? I began to suspect that the organizers had bitten off more than they could chew. I then began to hear grumbling among Canadian artists about vagueness of premise, poor communication and a sloppily handled selection process: funds were found for some artists, others were told that they should make their own way—artists' gossip. (I had applied for and received a travel grant.)

For my part, I was troubled by the way the topic of the conference was framed. I am leery of the term cross-cultural as it flattens relations of power and can therefore be used to depoliticizing effect, as when "cross-cultural communication" replaces discussion of

Opposite: temple carvings at Somnāthpur, 1268 AD, Karnātaka state, India.

racism. At the same time, I recognize that there are no single satisfactory terms to accomodate the variety of issues that the organizers hoped to address. More specifically, however, I was disturbed by the "Proposal Background" in the introductory package, which began with the statement, "Several years ago, the Canada Council (the Canadian Government's granting agency for the arts) recommended to its juries that the issue of 'voice appropriation' be considered in decisions about funding for artists." Not only was I suspicious of the image of "political correctness" gone wild in our institutions, the statement just isn't true. Neither the Canada Council nor to my knowledge any other funding body in Canada has adopted policy proscriptions against "cultural" or "voice appropriation." I expressed this concern when first contacted in September 1995, but the statement was never deleted from the advertising material. After I took issue with this misrepresentation during my talk at Convergence 1996, Paul Tate explained that he wrote the statement based on information from press clippings on the Internet. Apparently we're still confronting the fall out from *The Globe and Mail*'s sensationalist (mis)treatment of the recommendations from the council's Racial Equality Committee.[1]

Ironically, the conference restaged the conditions that launched the critique of cultural appropriation in the first place. There was no aboriginal speaker from any of the three countries (in India, "tribal" issues are as crucial to the national question as First Nations ones are in North America). Even if scheduled speaker Concordia University professor Gail Guthrie Valaskakis did not have to cancel, as the only aboriginal participant she might have found herself bearing an awkward "burden of representation." This situation was especially unfortunate since, in North America at any rate, native people have been the greatest advocates of this critique.

Several Indian participants complained of a conservative bent (both political and aesthetic) in the programming, and the Indian contingent did include a number of institutional egos. But despite the notable absences, there were still some very strong presentations at Convergence 1996. Standouts for me included Delhi-based Amit Mukhopadhyaya's politically sophisticated lecture on artist Somnath Hore, Minneapolis psychologist Nancy Kobrin's convergent analysis of postcolonial and traumatic stress in poster art, Concordia University professor Tom Waugh's look at Indian activist documentary and Vibha Sharma's own paper on the intricate economics and politics behind, and the social and cultural impact of, satellite television in India. In addition, most of the artist presentations were of very high quality, and I was especially excited to be introduced to the work of Indian artists such as Delhi-based, Canadian-exhibited Vivan Sundaram and a group of younger, regionally based installation artists who showed slides from an exhibition mounted in response to communal violence in nearby Bangalore, the latter thanks to artist Ayisha Abraham (recently of New York, now resettled in India), who gave up part of her allotted time to accommodate them.

Due at least in part to late proposals and the loss of a second room, the schedule was only finalized the night before the conference and the programme ended up haphazard and crammed (only to be exacerbated by daily power cuts). The continuous sequence of single presentations, which lasted from 9:30 AM to late in the evening, revealed no logical order. And with no time allotted to sightsee, shop or relax, participants took off on their own and in groups, and at any single time a goodly proportion was absent. I, for instance, sneaked out with some of the Indian and Canadian artists to visit the local art college and an excellent folklore museum on the university campus.

Although there was time for questions and comments after each paper, cross-dialogue was not encouraged, and no round tables, panels, plenary discussions or feedback sessions were planned. This burden was carried almost single-handedly by Vancouver artist Chris Creighton-Kelly's performance "The Power is Back On," and his very thoughtful and to the point follow-up session. But that couldn't suffice and finally, fueled by the frustrations of a number of participants (myself included), Montreal artist Su Schnee intervened, and a closing plenary and evaluation session was organized and co-facilitated by Canada Council video officer Yasmin Karim and Hyderabad art critic Rasna Bhushan.

At large gatherings people tend to fall into circles of common interest, politics, discipline, and at transnational events, nationality. Significantly, at Convergence 1996 nationality seemed to facilitate not only circles of affinity, but also the most virulent axes of disagreement. Although Vivan Sundaram opened his artist talk by wondering whether questions had been posed in too much of a "North American framework," most criticism by attending Indians was saved for other Indians—even Sundaram's remarks were more a jab at the organizers than an affront to the visitors—and the most stringent critique of North American speakers came from other North Americans (or by Canadians of Americans, to be more precise). It

was almost as if Sherry Simon's early Spivak-inspired lecture about the problems of translation put a jinx on the conference.

But we were all speaking English, which in any case is the intellectual lingua franca of India. This wasn't a problem of language but of context. It seems to me that for equitable transnational conversation to succeed, it requires self-consciously foregrounding and negotiating the terms of discussion, which in turn demands that one acknowledge the limitations of one's own discourse. For instance, in their own contexts a (non-Indian) Canadian artist working with "Indian" traditions faces a different set of issues from an Indian artist working with "European" ones (and I'm using these categories only for ease of argument; I'm not assuming that these are discrete or self-contained traditions). While the first may be accused of cultural appropriation, the second may be seen as giving in to cultural imperialism, as aping the West, or more likely, they may not be seen to be working "cross-culturally" at all, but simply as "modern" artists, for example. Indian diasporic artists, on the other hand, may find themselves particularly subject to interrogations about "authenticity," whatever the cultural inflection of their practice.

Alexander the Great with his Persian wife Roxana, accompanied by the Brahmins; from an Indian miniature of the seventeenth century.

Unfortunately, the written material for Convergence 1996 framed "cross-cultural art" mainly within a North American perspective. Americans and Canadians, despite our differences, share similar vocabularies and debates, hence our ability to converse easily, even in disagreement. Unfortunately, little attention was paid to the ways this issue manifests itself in an Indian context: what might "cross-cultural" mean in India, a country of many languages, cultures, and religions; is it considered to have any urgency or relevance; what are the circulating discourses and politics surrounding "tribal" images; how does "communalism" (notably Hindu–Muslim tensions) translate into the politics of art production? While we were meeting, a furor was heating up as officials of Karnataka state (in which Mysore and Bangalore are located) considered mandatory delays in the release of Hindi films as a means of promoting the local Kannada language cinema. This debate didn't make it into the formal sessions.

The contextual bias was aggravated by the fact that, with few exceptions, the academic and theoretical lectures by North Americans tended to be *about* India but not addressed *to* Indians; they assumed a universal

intellectual subject position. Similarly, I suspect that the subtleties and resonances of most of the Indian academic presentations were available only to those North Americans already familiar with India either through study or diasporic connections. Such is the result of an uneven flow of information.

On the other hand, the artist talks with slides or film, perhaps because of their essentially explicative nature or because of the openness of the visual image, seemed to sidestep this problem and appeared to me to elicit the most transnationally convergent conversations (Jim-Me Yoon, Jamelie Hassan and Sue Perry especially moved dialogue forward). This was so even when they sparked controversy and disagreement, as did California artist Richard Turner's, in which an appropriated Krishna image overlaid with the letters "LSD" ignited a heated debate. Turner, who meant his piece as a critique of American cultural arrogance, seemed surprised that his work should cause offense. In defense he stated that it wasn't made for Indians but as an intervention for Americans. Toronto-based filmmaker Srinivas Krishna correctly pointed out that there is a large Hindu community in California. But as usual, there wasn't time for a deeper exploration of the strategic use of possibly offensive religious imagery: what of Salman Rushdie, Andres Serrano or Krishna himself? Having just finished a videotape that raises the question of sex among Chinese bachelor workers of the nineteenth century, the hero ancestors of the community, I was particularly interested in this question. As artists seen to be working "inside" communities, how might we avoid reinscribing the very aspects we may be attempting to critique; can we guarantee that we only offend the intended targets and in the intended way; how do we ensure that our work isn't silenced by a repressive regime of "positive images?"

Convergence 1996 took place on the heels of Jean Chrétien's lucrative (and cynical) trade mission to India and other Asian countries. As capitalism becomes increasingly global and mobile, it is ever more urgent that transnational lines of communication are opened up and maintained between artists, intellectuals, trade unionists and other progressive activists. Convergence 1996 may have felt clumsy and costly (such resources couldn't be gathered every day). As an early effort it was nevertheless a very meaningful attempt at forging an alternative global communication.

Richard Fung's latest video is Dirty Laundry. *Thanks to Yasmin Karim for comments on this piece.*

Note

1. For more on this issue and my involvement with it, see Richard Fung, "Working through Cultural Appropriation," *FUSE Magazine*, Summer 1993, vol. 16, no. 5/6, pp. 16-24.