

## THE FIGHT TO BE DIFFERENT

**Comment on Unpacking Europe, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam:  
12 December 2001- February 24, 2002**

Euro centrism is grounded in traditional assumptions and beliefs and is better clarified by JM Blaut's quote from "*Colonisers' Model of the World*" . . . "The West makes history, it advances, progresses and modernises . . . the rest of the world keeps up or it stagnates." (1) In the case of colonisation, the West undermined existing cultures and plundered all that they stood for, deciding that it was not only right but that it was for the good of the conquered. Now, according to Rogoff, much of our present day cultural work is spent on the uncovering of these narratives of ejection and writing their perspectives back into the culture from where they were excised in the first place. In a way "Unpacking Europe" was also an example of this, however, it not only allowed the artists to put into perspective their own stance in European culture as a non-European, but also tried to turn the tables and consider Europe as the "other". I don't doubt that this would be difficult since the roots of European history find their way back in civilisations from all four corners of the globe. But unfortunately, what this exhibition didn't show for me was that Europe was the outsider. I often saw non-European artists portraying cultural elements in the most popular European manner. Interestingly enough though, if you dared to dig deeper and delve into the reams of text that accompanied this exposition then there was definitely an underlying element of indignance and pride; hurt and revenge.

I think Rogoff's central question in her script aptly describes the problem that these two worlds face. "How can we introduce difference, where it is not only absent, but deemed ethnically unthinkable, where the very notion of difference is seen to relativize and indeed trivialize one of the most tragic episodes of modern history?" (2) She uses the Holocaust as an example of the purest and ultimate form of Western Horror and places it as reference point on an index scale. She examines the concept that "difference" automatically conjures an image that someone or something will automatically be left out, violated or misrepresented. And in the same context, when we speak of underdeveloped nations, third worlds and corrupt regimes, we are therefore comparing with a developed, civilised entity and furthermore assuming that it already exists. That entity is, of course, the West as we know it. In fact we compare everything through our own "Western" imagery. We have actually gone as far as to inflict this imagery on others even though their beliefs and cultural practices were entirely different to our own. One perfect example is colonisation and to quote Dipesh Chakrabarty (3), it is undeniable that British rule put in place the practices, institutions and discourse of bourgeois individualism in the Indian soil. Early expressions of this desire to be a "legal subject" - that is, before the beginnings of nationalism - make it clear that to Indians in the 1830's and 1840's, to be a "modern individual" was to become European.

To the memory of the  
British Empire in India  
Which conferred subjecthood on us  
But withheld citizenship;

To which yet  
Everyone of us threw out the challenge  
"Civis Britannicus Sum"  
Because  
All that was good and living  
Within us  
Was made, shaped, and quickened  
By the same British Rule (4)

Rogoff further discusses the notable tension between “the familiar” and “the strange” and that we often disregard or neglect a problem that eludes or puzzles us. It’s as though incomprehensibility is an excuse for ignorance or denial. I think this was definitely one of the underlying concepts manifested in most works in “Unpacking Europe”. Many pieces tried to reinvent “the strange” as “familiar”, (familiar being that to Europe and its art institution) or at best a manipulation of “difference” in order to achieve acceptance. And it is here that we have to be careful. Firstly, not to interpret the “difference” as “special”, as occurs often when dealing with the unfamiliar or even minority. And secondly that the manipulation is carried out for the enhancement of the work piece and not only as a means of mass approval.

It was extremely difficult to compare and contrast the essays with the two installations in point for point detail, as these essays were, in themselves, a work piece for the exhibition. What was certainly clear was a more global unification between art and script. There was definitely an air of open transformation; a translation of the familiar into a new concept that quite often provided critical commentary on the way orthodox history of art has judged, categorised or completely overlooked other histories, cultures, artists, and their works. It was maybe not the exhibition that gave an answer to the publicised catchphrase “How European is Europe?” Because that answer is, and no-one can pretend, “very”. But what was certainly interesting and extremely important was the openness with which the artists expressed and created their own cultural sphere. And that the pleasure with which this was carried out was apparent. Another exciting thought is the fact that all these cultural beliefs and practices, art and handicrafts, interpretation and representation were displayed simultaneously and harmoniously. This is definitely an illustration to be mimicked in our real world.

It is the openness of this exhibition that allows us to breathe a sigh of relief, because far more important than the right of freedom of speech, individuality, cultural identity and so on is the acceptance and respect to practise it.

### *Bibliography*

1. JM Blaut, *The Coloniser's Model of the World: Geographical and Eurocentric History*, London and New York: The Guildford Press 1993, 28-29
2. Irit Rogoff, *Horrors Difference: Unpacking Europe*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam: Nai Publishers 2001, 86-95
3. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Post coloniality and the Artifact of History: Unpacking Europe*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam: Nai Publishers 2001, 183
4. Nirad C. Chadhuri, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968 [1951]), dedication page.
5. Nancy Hynes, *Addressing the Wandering Mind: Unpacking Europe*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam: Nai Publishers 2001, 396-401