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On The Shores of inequality

Boaz Levin on “Ground Zero” at Schinkel Pavillon

Art’s function as a channel for capital means that its infrastructures of exchange often go hand in hand with economic deregulation, with art fairs, commercial galleries, and museums all flourishing in countries where individual property rights are seen as sovereign, and where economic and social inequality are rife. And while contemporary art often comes with a stated moral agenda that stands in opposition to such exploitation, it nonetheless serves to perpetuate a logic of equality that equates the right to property with human rights per se. Here, Boaz Levin reports from a recent exhibition at Berlin’s Schinkel Pavillon that explored the impact of artistic understandings of the self on the shape and logic of the markets.

This December, Sri Lanka will inaugurate its first museum of “modern and contemporary art” in Colombo, the country’s commercial capital. The opening of the museum comes on the heels of a tense presidential election campaign that brought to power Sri Lanka’s former wartime defense chief, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, often credited for ending the country’s three-decade-long civil war by brutal means: a United Nations report estimates that as many as 40,000 civilians, mostly Tamils, were killed during the last months of that war, with thousands still listed as missing. Rajapaksa has since been accused of war crimes. In the aftermath of the war, and coinciding with an aggressive push toward market liberalization and rapid economic growth, Sri Lanka quickly became the site of a burgeoning art scene and market. The Colombo Art Biennale was launched by a consortium of galleries just months after the conflict came to its bloody end, with other commercial galleries, an art fair, and now, evidently, a museum all following suit.

Why has art become increasingly synonymous with economic liberalization, with art fairs sprouting like mushrooms on the damp earth of economic and social inequality? Grab an itinerary from your next jet-set art-world impresario and you’ll find a list of countries ranking high on “economic freedom” indexes: the UAE, Hong Kong, the UK, Switzerland: all bastions of property rights, an

archipelago of low-to-no-tax zones where offshore assets can be safely shelled. These are the kinds of places where capital flight, as historian Quinn Slobodian has recently written, is seen as the most sacred of human rights. “Ground Zero,” an exhibition by Christopher Kulendran Thomas in collaboration with Annika Kuhlmann at Berlin’s Schinkel Pavillon, offers an ambitious and complex, if at times convoluted, meditation on the relation between the institutionalization of “contemporary art” and the reorganization of the global political economy.

The work deftly traces the art boom that swept Sri Lanka in the aftermath of its civil war, questioning contemporary art’s relation to a human rights discourse “used to justify imperial ambitions” and offering a critique of the humanist abstractions it sees as the basis of both. At the center of the exhibition is a video titled *Being Human* (2019), projected on a large translucent screen dividing the space. The video follows the character of a young Sri Lankan expat artist (not unlike Christopher), portrayed by Ilavenil Jayapalan, as he returns to the island in the war’s aftermath. There, he discovers his erstwhile homeland of Marxist-separatist Tamil Eelam has been eradicated and replaced, as it were, by a thriving market economy and a globally connected art scene, flush with cash. As we tour the island, Jayapalan talks about AI, Kant, biopolitics, human rights, and posthumanism, in what might as well be the output of a prosumer-grade generative adversarial network (GAN) applied to a decade of e-flux verbiage.

This judgement is not meant as an indictment. The other two characters we encounter during the video are, in fact, synthetic assemblages scraped from the web: “deepfaked” doppelgängers of Taylor Swift and Oscar Murillo. The two are taken as emblematic of our radically malleable, free-floating, networked contemporary; highly mediated products valued, paradoxically, for trafficking in immediacy or even authenticity. Their likeness almost fooled me (with “Murillo,” I found myself failing the Turing test). The soundtrack, too, is a mix of zeitgeist cocktail and readymade, partly lifted from Arthur Jafa’s *The White Album* and partly based on an algorithmic reverse engineering of Max Martin’s secret sauce behind Swift’s all-time hits. The 25-minute looped video both frames and is framed by a “show within a show” of sculptures and paintings by Sri Lankan artists Upali Ananda and Kingsley Gunatillake, purchased by Thomas from their galleries and restaged here – as if they had stepped out of the video, where they also appear – as readymade- props. For much of the video’s duration they remain hidden, flashing intermittently from behind the frame. It is as if the exhibition in its entirety is wrapped by

yet another set of scare quotes, one more semblance in this dizzying hall of mirrors.

Yet for all its novelty, the art world’s fascination with AI in its various guises often ends up rehashing what is, in essence, a well-trodden modernist trope; after all, the generic and clichéd presented as a form of determinism has been with us at least since Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés*, Musil’s *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, and, of course, Duchamp. The logic that informed many of these works still seems to be applicable when it comes to the scraping and synthesizing of your latest GAN or bot. At the heart of this trope is a quandary concerning the possibilities for creativity within a context dominated by market logic: questions of authorship and taste in the age of newspapers; mass advertising; “creatives”; target audiences; and, now, networked devices and the data mining they enable. If anything, algorithms have simply furthered this challenge in that – as Wendy Chun has eloquently shown – preferences for less generic and ostensibly more “original” content are paradoxically also easier to predict using social media algorithms. The more one deviates from the mean, the more predictable one becomes. As synthetic Swift quips, “Everybody demands authenticity, and every artist believes that they are for real. I mean, I believe that I’m genuine in what I’m doing. But that’s the paradox. Because so does everyone else.”

So where does this leave Thomas, Kuhlmann, and us? How is one to escape the shapeless, all-devouring blob of the contemporary with its desire for synthesized, neatly marketed authenticity? Despite its lamentation about “the contemporary,”

“Ground Zero” is itself elaborately timestamped by bleeding-edge tech and trendy posthumanist discourse. But maybe that’s the point? The historical scope of their narrative seems to be its redeeming factor. “This is contemporary art, and nowadays it’s everywhere. But what is it, and how did it get here?” Jayapalan asks at the video’s opening scene. The project of making “here” everywhere is key to this story. Asking about the origin of contemporary art requires that we ask about the origins of the global economy.

A history of globalization, and more specifically the development of neoliberalism, is however conspicuously absent from the exhibition’s narrative. Instead, Thomas and Kuhlmann trace the origins of their story to the inception of universal human rights, and it is here that their plot veers toward slightly more predictable art-world terrain. Like contemporary art, which Jayapalan (channeling Groys) describes as being governed by a logic of

radical equalization – “an art that no longer discriminates between mediums, or disciplines or historical or cultural or geographical reference points” – the notion of international human rights, too, posits a space of “theoretical equality” that is in fact “mediated by unequal powers,” to quote synth-Murillo. So far so good, but the missing link here is neoliberalism. In recent years, numerous critics have noted the twinned birth of human rights and neoliberalism and their parallel historical trajectories, questioning the complicity of a human rights discourse insulated from matters of economic and social justice in a world of radical inequality. Are human rights and neoliberalism identical? It’s a legitimate question, but one which is left unasked. Instead, we are offered a wholesale condemnation of human rights and a vague plea for some sort of posthumanist, decentralized autonomous system of governance that feels like a worn art-world cliché.

Be this as it may, “Ground Zero” remains a complex and ambitious exhibition, joining a rare group of works – including Walid Raad’s *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* (2007–2011) and Hito Steyerl’s *Is the Museum a Battlefield* (2013) – in offering an example of a scaled-up project of Institutional Critique, attempting to address the infrastructure, politics, and ideology of today’s accelerated and globalized means of distribution and display.

Yet if we are to better understand contemporary art, seeing it as a purely homogenizing force is not enough. Contemporary art might tend to the eradication of geographic difference, but it still has a map. A quick look at that itinerary we borrowed from our art-loving one-percenter would show an art circuit plotted along the shores of rising inequality; it accrues not where there is a strong presence of human rights but, rather, where a specific historical understanding of human rights – one that places property rights above all else and is thus central to neoliberal ideology and statecraft – is in place.