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COVER STORY

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Ghost: The Transaesthetics of Bose Krishnamachari

Bose Krishnamachari presented his latest solo project 'Ghost' at the Aicon Gallery, London. In this project, Bose seems to be creating a discourse on the death of the contemporary (art) and also he seems to be keen on establishing a museum discourse, which is based on desire and illusion. In short, Bose's museum is an Amuseum; a museum of oblivion, says **JohnyML**.

Art has exceeded its purpose and limits. On the one hand art is everywhere, and on the other, art is nowhere. The distinction between an aesthetical object and a banal one has collapsed, hence when the banal is brought to where, conventionally speaking, the art is supposed to be (in galleries, museums, collectors' walls, internet space etc) it either looks aesthetically transcended (transaesthetics, in Baudrillard's formulation) or looks completely ordinary in its astounding banality. However, when a viewer is invited to see the works, which are obviously banal and aesthetically alluring, he/she is put into a confusion vis-à-vis the unpacking of artistic intentionality or de-layering their very textuality. In its



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excess, art still succeeds to hold its 'assumed truth' because, any viewer-ly intervention can stem only from the 'doubt/ambiguity' created by the artist and the viewer simultaneously. Contemporary art functions from/in/through/by this perpetual ambiguity.

Bose Krishnamachari's latest solo exhibition, 'Ghost' presented at the Aicon Gallery, London is an artistic deliberation on this 'doubt about contemporary (art)'. The show has six painted portraits, out of which five are hailed as 'the portraits of the domestic helps who make (any) (upper) middle class Mumbai home tick smoothly' and one is the self portrait of the artist. Besides, there are 108 one foot by one foot photographic portraits of artist's friends and acquaintances and the artist says that the selection is randomly done. The third unit is a revised version of 'Ghost/Transmemoir' installation of dabbas fitted with LCD video monitors that play up the interviews of (again) the randomly selected Mumbai citizens. The fourth unit, which is central to the whole show, is an architectural model of Bose's forthcoming museum, placed within in vitrine-like case and is called 'Amuseum/Ghost'. A few elevation drawings of the architecture are also presented along. All except the portrait of the artist himself and the 'Ghost/Transmemoir' installation are covered with silver screen (a fine cloth used in movie halls to project films) that imparts a sort of haziness to the people and objects behind.

The show is a tribute to 20,800,000 Mumbaikars (Mumbai-ites). Any tribute is a memorial service, a thanksgiving and an act of appreciation. Tribute, though given to a living person/s is a conscious effort to re-member the past deeds. The ambiguity that Bose Krishnamachari would like to deal with (in this show) starts from this tribute itself. As the title 'Ghost' suggests, the ambiguity is all about the 'living' present and the 'dead' past. Then, what we confront in this project is a mausoleum, a grotto of the dead. How is it possible as we know that all what is represented by the artist are living entities? The model museum, the museum as an unrealized project (or realizable in the near future) is about what is yet to come/the future. Where has the present gone? What is the present of a metropolis like Mumbai? Do these portraits play evidence to their present-ness, their kicking, toiling, celebrating and surviving lives? Why does the artist cover all of them with silver screen? Is it a banal reference to the tinsel town dreams that Mumbai generates?

To understand these questions (not to answer them) one has to go to the future project of Bose; the 'Amuseum/Ghost'. Here he plays with the duality of existence; a place for what is dead and also a place for what could live even in death. The excess of art simultaneously heralds the death of art too. Unlike the modern art (now it could be called 'the' modern art as historical classifications have been done between pre-modern, proto-modern, modern, avant garde, post modern. The only ambiguous area is contemporary art as it is driven by the death wish, an excessive drive to see the end within a short span of time), contemporary thrives in excess, in fastness and flimsiness. However, the aesthetical value that we demand and attribute from and to art, as the artists and viewers, supplies a sort of life extension. Museum, as Bose conceives in his project, becomes a place where dead objects are clinically/critically put into 'life'. The very idea of unrealized museum (which is still in its blueprint stage) is seen to be clinically dead and the very desire of making it (or even materializing it) is a tribute to the idea of 'dying contemporary art.'

The vitrine in which the museum model is kept is nothing but a coffin, a safe abode for the dead and the silver screen becomes a

Johny ML

REVISIT

a presentation by
rajan krishnan
conceptualised by
johny m.l

at
OED Alternative art
space
August 02-30



The APB Foundation Signature Art Prize 2008, Singapore was held on 11th July. Indian artist Iranna GR's work titled 'Wounded Tools' is one of the ten finalist works.

Now Iranna is eligible to win one of the following awards on 14th October: the Grand Prize (SGD \$45,000), one of three Juror's Prizes (SGD\$10,000), and/or the People's Choice Award (SGD \$10,000). You may vote for Iranna GR to win the prize.

You can see the finalists' works and vote for your candidate [here](#) ».

shroud. Bose, quite cleverly calls this work, 'Amuseum/Ghost'. Obviously, he refers to his 1992 project 'Amuseum' but in the present context, Amuseum/Ghost becomes an ambiguous word play. It is an anti-museum, a counter-museum and a ghost museum, which has a precise planning and execution. It contains not only the idea of the daily death of contemporary art but also the eventual death of the existing museum discourse. 'Amuseum/Ghost', shrouded by its milky glory, invites the viewer to see the death of an era; an era celebrating its own death in the company of ghosts. Bose, an artist who has always talked about the death of memory and history's ultimate struggle to contain it, here visually proves how museum could be an anti-thesis to history/memory by becoming a memorial for the oblivion; a museum of dreams, desire, illusion and death of all these in one go. A tribute to forgetfulness and laughter.

Excessive people and excessive art-an interesting duo complicatedly conjoined. Bose lives within this excess, practice the excess and all his efforts are directed towards pushing the limits of this excess. Between burgeoning demographic data and cataloguing of art, an artist has to make certain choices to mediate an idea, the subjectivity and a position. Any excess after a point cease to become excess at all! They nullify themselves in their excessiveness. Mumbai with its materialistic flourish and milling populace, nullify itself to void, a kind of meaninglessness. Voting itself to void (by anything or anybody) through the projection of excess is an automatic strategy to conceal the fact that its existence is nothing but excess and its meaninglessness. Mumbai votes itself to void, it performs its existence to the breaking point of meaning and collapses into meaninglessness. A commuter in the local train and a reveler in the night club feel the same; in their contortionist existence in a packed local train compartment and total abandon and glee in a night club, they feel the same, void and death.

Bose's portraits talk about the excessive life of Mumbai or to generalize it further a single portrait (whether it be that of a domestic help or that of a well known artist) by Bose reveals (or conceal?) nothing but the excessive life/death of any human being in any urban space or to be precise, any space mediated by urban ideologies. Though, the introductory debates that accompany Bose's show try to detail how the artist has taken pains to 'represent' the Mumbai-ite irrespective of his/her position in social hierarchy. However, for me, Bose's decision to place such arguments as a preamble to his project seems deliberate. It is a ploy to deflect the intentional meaning from the perceived meaning so that the imminent death of the work could be prolonged for a while till they get their due place in the 'counter' museums.

Ambiguity once again plays a pivotal role in Bose's artistic deliberation in making the portraits. The five portraits of (Bose's) domestic helps, as the preambles say, are done as a tribute to their contribution. Then the question is who is helping who? Do they help Bose to 'function well' in his excess or Bose helps them to 'survive' in a big bad city? In their entangled mutuality, who wields power over who? Here I would make suggestion that these portraits are neither commemorative portraits (tributes) nor representative (metaphorical) portraits of power relations. For me, they are critical portraits; a criticism leveled against the nullity of Mumbai, its excessiveness, death and concealment of things. While talking about Disney Land, Baudrillard says that Disney Land is created not for establishing a theme park in America. But it is created for concealing the fact that the whole America is a theme park. Going

by this, I would propose that Bose's portraits are not about the people who are portrayed but to underline the fact that Mumbai (or any other city) is nothing but a vast vault that conceals people and their life/death to nothingness. These portraits are the Amuseum, which is otherwise called Mumbai. Mumbai is a museum of forgetfulness, shrouded by the silver screen.

The galaxy of 108 people, of well known and scarcely known people too functions as an amuseum of sorts. I am thinking in terms of their (these people as shrouded photographic portraits) future entry into (any) museum. Their names are then forgotten from the public memory, their contributions are catalogued for an interested audience, many are dead and gone, some even the failing memory of the artist cannot discern, a detached and alien audience look at these portraits as if they were from a commemorative album; all of them once held their lives so dear, but now dead (though living) for a 'living' audience. Their 'contemporary-ness' consigned to references, they look representing a time and locale that had made itself void and null. If the portraits of the five domestic helps are the critical portraits, these 108 photographic portraits are 'future portraits' of a dead city and dead people. They represent (if at all any portrait could represent the subject of the portrait) a ghost city, a ghost memory therefore they are illusionary portraits. Bose calls these works, 'Mumbaikar/Host-Passport'. I would rephrase it: 'Mumbaikar/Ghost-Passport'. It is a passport to museum, an amuseum (to reiterate, a museum where forgetfulness is showcased in the form of memory, dream and tribute). They are anti-portraits. Those who are alive now and seen photographed by Bose must be reading this with a shudder running through their spine.

If all these portraits are 'non-existent' portraits or portraits of oblivion, then how does one look at Bose's self portrait? The self portrait here is titled, 'Red 'n' Black'. Against the somber duo-tones of other portraits, Bose's self portrait looks strong and aggressively penetrating with its red and black tones, a laughter that ends up in a lingering smile pervades his face, the gaze of his eyes are accentuated with 'live' black, while the contours of his jaw bone and nose look prominent and definite. The technique that he employs to create the portraits of the domestic helps and self portrait is same; cross hatching of ball point pen on canvas. However, this portrait has the menacing presence of an anti-hero who watches over his 'subjects' and the 'objects' of his own making, the 'Amuseum/Ghost'. Unlike the other portraits (the critical portraits are with grand steel frames, which almost resemble the masters' paintings framed and displayed in the museums and the future portraits are with neat off with thick wooden frames), the self-portrait does not have a frame. The stretch of the canvas, the stapler pins are visible from the sides.

There is feeling of nudity about this self-portrait. This nudity is something akin to the nudity that we feel while confronting the European classical and Renaissance art. This is the nudity of the God and Man. Though the shirt collar is suggested in this portrait, any informed viewer is reminded of a couple of works done by Bose in the previous years where he occupies the forefront portion of the canvas with his strong stout shirtless body and bald head gleaming. There is a posture of anti-Angel (I am afraid to say anti-God as the artist is god fearing and likes stylish talismans) in Bose's self portrait. He is a retriever of a lost paradise or an archangel who guards an illusionary space or a space of desire (an amuseum). He becomes distinct in the self-created aura against which the contemporary art is always validated. Positing himself into

Mammon's status (the dark angel of wealth as referred in John Milton's 'Paradise Lost') is an interesting artistic ploy, a critique on contemporary situation where, "visibility and fame, not contents, were (are) the real engine of the New Art Order. Its power and glamour managed to entice, subdue and integrate any potential threat. Criticizing art, in fact, has become the royal way to an art career and this will be no exception." (Quoted from Sylvere Lotringer's introduction to Jean Baudrillard's 'The Conspiracy of Art') Bose knows this exception and he plays it up visually through his 'Ghost' project.

One hundred and eight Mumbai-ites speak to us from those small LCD monitors. They talk about their lives, dreams and hopes in Mumbai. It is a revisit to Bose's own 'Ghost-Transmemoir' installation (2006). Watched against the context of 'Ghost' this installation gets a new meaning; an aspiration towards capturing meaninglessness of the Mumbai lives. The iconic dabbas, the hangers of local compartments, the mesh of wires, headphones and the general cacophony adds to the viewing. This is a carnival of sounds and visuals, in which each sound and each visual trying to get the due space, and end up in babbling. The talk of desire merges into illusion of sounds, the superimposition of Bollywood music and the religious chanting with the recounting of personal experiences create a Babel of its own (surprisingly Bose's installation reminds the viewer of a Babel Tower, another unfinished project of Man). Excessiveness transcends itself of aesthetics here and reaches to nullity only to be retrieved by the ghostly presence of the artist as a critic and facilitator. The shroud over the other portraits transforms itself into sounds (a sonic veil) and covers the individual narratives.

Bose Krishnamachari's interest in excess and ambiguity, to put it in Lotringer's words, is 'not a point of departure but a point of no return'. Interestingly, contemporary art is such a phenomenon that in order to survive it has to convert banality into ideology; or in other terms, triviality of life into graveness of death. Hence, it has to come back to its own point of departure, the focal point, the people. Bose knows it well and he articulates it through 'Ghost'. His 'Ghost' is not an exception but a norm; a critique on contemporary art to survive within contemporary art; an intelligent artist's desire to eternity and Museum.