

Global Containers: Containing Visual Arts in the Age of Globalisation

Kublai Khan had noticed that Marco Polo's cities resembled one another, as if the passage from one to another involved not a journey but a change of elements. Now, from each city Marco described to him, the Great Khan's mind set out on its own, and after dismantling the city piece by piece, he reconstructed it in other ways, substituting components, shifting them, inverting them.

Italo Calvino

Calvino's fictive imagination paints a dark possibility as to the way history has framed the world today, which uncannily seems to reinvent itself within the discourse of globalisation. To think of the world in distinct and quantitative cultural composites to be venerated and celebrated and yet waiting to be exploited, re-interpreted and curricularised (as Calvino's Kublai Khan does) into an international idiom of globalisation is, indeed, odd though true. In this essay, I seek to opine on the adage globalisation and foreground it as an instrument of control, study the manner in which it devours art and find apt responses to these two conundrums in the art of Atta Kim.

I

'Go global' is a commonplace maxim. Cross-border exchange of commerce, ideas, peoples, and even disease and terror to any part of the world is at best liquid capital. It is a new world where concepts of time and space narrows with the advent of speedier modes of transport and communications like the Internet. Colonialism exorcised, modernity debunked, there has been increasing pressure on newly industrialising and modernising societies and communities to become viable sites of liberal democratic capitalism.

Globalisation has its roots in seventeenth century industrialisation and became manifestly commandant during the project of colonialism and its attendant, modernism. The establishment of the English language as *lingua franca* of the world was the first globalised attempt at mono-culturalism (especially for trade, law and education) amidst highly diverse and distinct communities and civilisations. While English remains today

the preferred link language of commerce, it carries with it the remains of colonial ideology and continues to be unraveled in emerging socio-cultural discourses and criticism. As modern cities and environments become experiences that cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology, the English language unites humankind by organising people into citizens of the world. Perhaps globalisation and modernism are a paradoxical unity of disunity. As Marshal Berman notes, a unity of disunity: “it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish”. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air” (1982: 15) Marx’s pronouncement rings true today only to be encapsulated by Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), which chillingly proposes cloning the human at literal and metaphorical levels, and collectivism as a means of enabling a global workforce. In this collectivism, there is no kinship nor reciprocity, only stark human capital.

In this starkness of human capital is there a sense of *self*? Globalisation erases the volatility of human life and experience through the reduction of geographical distance for shared cross-border socio-economic-political exchange, thereby producing a culture of similarity or sameness. Where then is the sense of *self*? A feature of modernism was that it proposed a calming of this volatility to find a sense of *self*. Globalisation risks a claim on this, too, where conflicts between class and ideological forces, emotional and physical forces and individual and social forces are mystified and veneered to reflect a language of uniformity and indifference. Old structures of value systems are subsumed within a framework of free trade marked by mergers and acquisitions. Insidiously, globalisation suppresses the human *self* and creates a mythic *self* – one, which is structured on the principles of an exchange-value: A mythic self that congregates at the doorsteps of a global village. The global village (Marshall McLuhan) is nothing more than a utopia of sameness, of dogmatic orthodoxies only to find its allegory in T.S Eliot’s cultural despair of seeing modern life being “spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table,” (1998: 3) “uniformly hollow, sterile, flat, one-dimensional, empty of human possibilities”, and which is reliving itself in the global. “Anything that looks like freedom or beauty is really only a screen for more profound enslavement and horror” (Berman 1982: 169-170).

With a certain apocalyptic speculation, Francis Fukuyama (1995) calls globalisation as being representative of the “end of ideology”, that is, an ideology shaped by the locality of a community, in particular, through its kinship, history and reciprocity. The exchange-value structure, premised on free trade, quickened this end together with it any sensibility of a community. In 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall reconstituted this quickening as the world realised issues regarding citizenship were increasingly taking shape. The invention of communication technology and especially the Internet, the communicative symbol par excellence of economic, social, political and cultural free trade has made humans pilgrims, vagabonds, tourists, players, and strollers of the information highway.

Today, the promise of globalisation to a meaningful and 'beneficial-to-all' principle is viewed with skepticism as societies awake to the treachery of adhering to universal financial and economic guidelines that negate economic, social and historical specificity: the financial collapse and impact in Indonesia and Argentina in the beginning of the 21st century are a case in point. Anti-globalisation protests have greatly fallen on deaf ears as the blind faith to economic viability as the sole path to human survival and sustainability continues to be guiding light of political systems. The question then is – whose globalisation, whose benefit? The gavel of Wall Street signifies the demise of authority and power of financial economies elsewhere. Wall Street narratives have become the *grand recit* of globalisation. Despite the collapse of the financial order in Wall Street, the narrative of collapse continues the grand recit in the form of scapes and organizational nodes. Examples of these scapes and nodes include airports, which serve to centralise and control human traffic; stock exchanges, which centralise share and currency trading; international news, which is centralised through agencies such as Associated Press and Reuters; and, search engines such as Google that organise information for consumption. These scapes and nodes control and manage the relay of information and movement of people across national borders, which individual communities are unable to control. Every emergent society wants to be part of this traffic control but these scapes do raise new forms of inequalities (US and European control of major markets); new forms of desires (commodity fetish for US and European products); new forms of risks (increase on surveillance, spread of diseases); and new forms of socialisations (cultural products such as world music and celebrity worship) (Urry 2000: 65). The very notion of 'society' is questioned today.

The terrorist bombing of the World Trade Centre (WTC) in New York on 11 Sept 2001, much etched in the human mind, is indeed an attack on globalisation embodied in the lived experience of the WTC and its numerous nationalities working within the semiotic rubric of America. In a Baudrillardian sense, the bombing was nothing more than a simulacrum of the growing concerns of globalisation. As the world viewed the multiple angles and picture frames of the 'Live from New York' bombing, the world reveled in its own obscene ecstasy. The event was a baroque opera performed to demonstrate a suffering scion of democracy, of globalisation. Baudrillard's pronouncement against globalisation was telling. He says,

We are no longer a part of the drama of alienation; we live in the ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene. The obscene is what does away with every mirror, every look, every image. The obscene puts an end to every representation. But it is not only the sexual that becomes obscene in pornography; today there is a whole pornography of information and communication, that is to say, of circuits and networks...in their readability, their fluidity, their availability, their regulation, in their forced signification, in their performativity, in their polyvalence, in their free expression (1983: 130-131).

II

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel declared that the history of art was just a story, and that it had come to an end. He based this in part on the view that art was no longer able to relate society as it once has done...A gap had grown up between society and art, which has increasingly become a subject for intellectual judgement rather than...an object of sensuous and spiritual response.

Arthur C Danto

Art today is both an abstraction and a distraction. As a critique of representational practice in art, the practice of abstraction gained momentum and became the dicta of twentieth and twenty-first centuries employing three-dimensional, performative and multimedia activities to its tenets. Representational practice was held suspect of cultural categorism where it presented, mirrored and stereotyped peoples and ideas. Abstraction was critical, and is still valuable, in propping a palimpsest of ideas and value systems but in recent times has taken serious interrogation as conceptual frivolity and artistry, all in the free-play with nihilism (Nietzsche), the sublime (Kant) and excess (Bataille) referenced themselves into art. Certain totalitarianism has set in and its manifestation was felt in the 2001 Turner Prize award.

Martin Creed's winning of the 2001 Turner Prize for a minimalist installation work, *Lights Going On and Off*—an empty gallery centred with flashing lights—as premised on a post-modern diatribe: “people can make of it what they like. I don't think it is for me to explain it” (BBC News 10 Dec 2001). His win reinforced the growing distension with the path of abstraction. The curators' response and analysis of the work leaves the view paralysed at best: “his work was emblematic of mortality...what Creed has done is really make minimal art minimal by dematerialising it — removing it from the hectic, commercialised world of capitalist culture. His installation activates the entire space” (BBC News 9 Dec 2001). This does mark a major turning point in the history of contemporary art and the end of imagination could not have been any closer, for many. Abstraction, in its post-structuralist discourse stigmatises localised practices and representational practices as being reductive and unassimilable into the art world despite the fact that representational and figurative works still carry strong collector sentiments in auction houses and galleries.

The development of abstraction, I would argue, has thinned today into notional principles of displaced abstractions that defy locality, embrace psychology, denies identity and promotes universality and celebrates dramatic display of exhibitions. Premised on the post-modern campaign of equality of human life and being, the world today seeks to transcend the cultural, spiritual and socio-political specificity of communities, which have been exposed to harbour biased and fundamental problematics in thinking and application. An internationalist practice has emerged premised on the post-structuralist distrust of authorial intent and the over-reverberance of signifiers in the

creation of meanings; and today, painting, I would argue—to borrow Georges Bataille’s words—is a site of trauma, loss and castration (Fer 1997: 3). The castrated abstract art today is one that privileges ‘universal’ aesthetics and concepts over localised ones. This is notable amongst emerging new art markets in third world countries where the need to produce artworks tenable with the expectation of the well-travelled, well-informed tourist whose market gaze is informed by this internationalist standard that is primarily a western discourse. These emergent markets, pushed to the forefront primarily by global economics, negate their own art and historical development.

The rise of art biennales goes in tandem with the global ebb and flow. As a cultural *scape* of globalisation, art biennales serve as meccas of internationalist practice, where a free-trade emporium or trade fair space earmarks the ideological death of communities as their art is presented in a nexus of ideas and money. From Sydney to Venice, to Dhaka to San Paolo, to New York to Japan, art biennales have registered a powerful *scape* that manages and sets the international benchmark for art practice through a dramatic display of exhibitory prowess. Biennales are big on international concerns of social matters, aesthetics and meta-narratives, small on local concerns. Identifiable pavilions, booths and signages are the lone representatives of locality and cultural specificity. Any semblance of a localised identity is often, not always, negotiated through the mass cultural appeal of exoticism: Indian, Chinese, African, Andean, Aboriginal iconography have flavoured mass consumption and continues to exert a colonising presence on the native spaces and minds.

In another turn, the emergence of ‘freeports’ for art is disconcerting. A free port is a nexus of trade, which benefits from relaxed custom and excise. Many ports such as Singapore and Hong Kong were founded as free ports during colonialism. Today, Luxembourg, Geneva, Zuerich, Singapore and Beijing are fast becoming freeports or ports of call for storing art not dissimilar to a safe deposit box in a bank. Pioneered by the Swiss, the main attraction unfortunately is antithetical to the purpose of art: to keep valuable art, trapped in private collection and worth billions of dollars, away from public access and scrutiny. In a recent article, *The Economist* (23 Nov 2013) states:

The world’s rich are increasingly investing in expensive stuff, and ‘freeports’ such as Luxembourg’s are becoming their repositories of choice. Their attractions are similar to those offered by offshore financial centres: security and confidentiality, not much scrutiny, the ability for owners to hide behind nominees, and an array of tax advantages. This special treatment is possible because goods in freeports are technically in transit, even if in reality the ports are used more and more as permanent home for accumulated wealth.

With prison-like vault security art, fine wine, jewelry, gold and classic cars are cared for in these containers of culture siting in transit between cultures and private and public ownership providing legitimate and much needed comfort and solace to “kleptocrats and tax-dodgers as well as plutocrats.” (23 Nov 2013).



The Museum Project #001, from the series "Field," 122x162cm, 48x64 inches, 1995, chromogenic print

Art in freeports are free from custom duties and taxes as they are primarily in transit from one place to another. However, they can remain in one place for an eternity without attracting taxation and without access to the world. Art today is trapped and boxed within the very structuralist framework that post-structuralism negated and enslaved to a capitalist narrative.

III

The quiet icon of globalisation is the container. Stoic, static and stationed at various ports from Rotterdam to Singapore to Shanghai, the container symbolises the discipline of trade, its impenetrable nature and its containment of consumer fetish. The containers—20 to 40 footers—do not move. They are moved. Prone to abuse, mistrust and piracy, the containers that form a main physical bulk of economic trade for many countries have, at an ontological level, a toughness akin to a human body. The human body as a site of inscription is not new. As a site of divinity and as site of *self*, the body is marked by instability and indeterminate set of meanings embroiled in a Kantian free-play with authorial narratives that stake claim to power. What then are the inscriptive codes of the globalised world on the body? The containers may provide an answer.



The Museum Project #003, from the series "Field," 122x182cm, 48x64 inches, 1996, chromogenic print

The cultural correlation between the container and the human body are concerns of Korean artist Atta Kim's grand MUSEUM PROJECT undertaking. Shifting away from a globalised abstraction, Kim's work resurrect representation through photography, in the *Series of Fields*, where he presents naked human (Asian/Korean) bodies—trapped, captured, confined, showcased, exhibited, controlled, moved, transported, caricatured—in acrylic boxes. The size of the boxes are uniform and do not allow for much movement. The acrylic boxes are contemporaneous coffins that gain legitimacy by seeking similarity to fetuses found in beakers at science research labs. The bodies are silenced by their nakedness and lack of identity. The boxes of bodies reverberate of museum and anthropological collections that are constantly waiting, waiting to be moved, identified and freed. The transparent boxes are a metaphor for the transparent and invisible control over the human.

Kim suggests several possibilities of freedom. In the #001 *Series of Field*, Kim presents the alienated containers abandoned on a deserted road. A potentially busy road encounters abandoned boxes of bodies, strategically placed on the road to be run over. An accident leading to freedom is the only possibility here. It reminds one of the trafficking of human refugees left to the mercy of the globalisation's alter ego: piracy. Yet another freedom is proposed in #003 *Series of Field*, where boxes of naked bodies are placed at the cosmetic section of a departmental store. Awaiting to be unpacked, freedom for these bodies is through social veneering, that is through cosmetics, to become something other than the freed *self*. Yet another freedom is starkly crisis-ridden. In #019 *Series of Field*, nine upright boxes face the ocean. Awaiting to leave for a new identity elsewhere, or were they left



The Museum Project #019, from the series "Field," 122x162cm, 48x64 inches, 1997, chromogenic print

behind as rejects, or are they ship-wrecked treasured on an island trapped within the confines of their prejudices, beliefs and value systems? Kim's work does have far reaching consequences.

In Kim's works the naked body is central and devoid of inscription and serve to become a manifesto for dead and moving bodies. In actual fact the viewer imposes the inscription. Clothing and nudity have worn themselves out of current practice. Nakedness references itself to the body politic, as the contested terrain for ideas unlike nudity, which still references itself with the body physical. The body today has been removed of its grandiose divinity, linen virginality and quiet sacredness and in place is nexus for value exchange of the commodity culture. Through the fetishisation of a commodity culture, nakedness, in the global world, is nothing more than a cultural veneer that cloaks the horror of assimilation and sameness. Kim's work emphasises a melange of assimilation and representation. Is the body involved or mute to this writing of globalisation? Is it a writing of enslavement, empowerment, docility, rebellion or virtuosity? This uncertainty could be resolved if we in part accept phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's belief that "experience discloses beneath objective space, in which the body eventually find its place, a primitive spatiality of which experience is merely the outer covering and which merges within the body's very being. To be the body, is to be tied to a certain world, as we have seen; our body is not primarily in space, it is of it" (1996: 148).

IV

The state of the visual art in the current international practice is nebulous, as the stream of globalisation has overflowed. Rocks in the stream take the shape of economic volatility; tributaries manifest themselves in terrorist activities to stake their right to exist. Caught between a venerated internationalist mode of practice and a jaded traditionalist mode of practice, which has been commodified further as the exotic for mass consumption, contemporary art has become the very structuralist and essentialist principle that is fought against. New visions are needed; a dramatic incident is needed to spur a new awareness. Artists are seeking to return to the habitat, exercising a right to justify a located-ness in the global while the stoic container of the global is still in control.

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Images courtesy of the artist Atta Kim.

Notes

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