

AN OPEN LETTER Concerning Censorship at the 3RD Guangzhou Triennale

Our mixed media installation that was commissioned by the Third Guangzhou Triennial in China has been censored. The Triennial exhibition, entitled “Farewell to Post-Colonialism” is on view at the Guangdong Museum, the primary Triennial venue, from September 6 through November 16th, 2008. This international showcase was organized by three curators: Gao Shiming, Sarat Maharaj, and Chang Tsong-zung with additional curatorial contributions by seven “Research Curators.”

We are troubled that a unilateral decision has been taken to censor our work without any attempt at dialogue or even without informing us about how, by whom or why such a decision was made. This censorship is further egregious in that museum visitors and viewers of our (curtailed) work are not being informed that any such censorship is in operation. In true Kafkaesque fashion, censorship rears its cowardly head while hiding its traces and its train of command.

During the private opening and the first day of the public opening we—and a research curator—made repeated requests through an assistant for a meeting or dialog with the museum director (whom we indirectly learned was the one making this decision). These were not heeded. At no point did the Director indicate any interest in trying to discuss the matter with the research curator or with us. However, the video was allowed to be shown during the opening afternoon, and has been turned off again. In retrospect, this afternoon of projection appears to be a calculated act to temporarily appease us.

At no point in the process of vetting and finally commissioning the project did any of the organizers indicate that there might be any issues or potential issues with our project, even though we had clearly stated our intention of showing appropriated pornography. To quote our catalogue statement,

“Inside, the Bed-Inn is haunted by projections of bodies engaged in sex acts, appropriated from a mix of footage—from ... 1960’s ‘underground’ films to contemporary internet porn. One manifestation of the ‘sexual revolution,’ pornography was seen by its advocates as a utopian civil right, alongside free love and free speech.... Here, in the Bed-Inn, ... this space of virtual activity awaits the insertion of the actual bodies of audience members.”

That this ‘sexual revolution’ is associated predominantly with the West (though feminism and women’s rights are manifested globally) provides further impetus for examining its legacy from the vantage of a rapidly changing China.

Our installation, admittedly, is provocative, but we wanted to engage with the exhibition’s contested theme and title: *Farewell to Postcolonialism*. We have taken the subject seriously, especially given our histories that we are both from previously colonized countries that even now grapple with the throes of post- and neo-colonialism. Our belief that histories and geographical locations literally mark the human body impelled us to create a work that examines the body as marked by history and as carrier of infectious ideas and contagious actions. The video component consists of the kind of footage that has been multiply received: celebrated as liberatory, as spiritual even,

privately consumed and/or publicly condemned. Our point is precisely that such material is contextualized by its and the body's relationship to power, and in this case is further inflected by its historical relationship to the 1960s' liberation struggles of the individual and collective body.

Our installation title, *2008 Springtimes for John and Yoko: the Bed-In*, references both the remarkable film, *79 Springtimes of Ho Chi Minh*, by Cuban revolutionary filmmaker Santiago Alvarez, and John Lennon and Yoko Ono's legendary "Bed-In" protests against the Vietnam War. As discourses against censorship, authoritarianism and abuses of power, they illustrate that iconic period of world-wide optimistic political foment, popular resistance and radical politics that has since come to represent a lost time of possibilities. Our awareness of how differently such discourses have played out ideologically and materially in China and in the USA are also what inform this installation.

We should not have been surprised, but it is nevertheless ironic that a work ruminating on historical memory has been switched off through an act of enforced amnesia. This act removes the viewers' choice, not least by removing the viewers' knowledge of a choice to be made. The video is projected behind curtains; it would have been simple to provide a warning sign in front of the curtains indicating the video's subject matter, allowing the viewer their own choice on whether or not to proceed.

Also ironically, our work is situated within the exhibition and catalogue section, "Free Radicals." Not so free, presumably. The curatorial statement draws attention to the "'political correctness at large' that is the result of the power play of multiculturalism, identity politics and post-colonial discourse." Yet here is an example of an artwork engaging those same discourses that is shut down by a far more insidious form of "political correctness"—one enacted by an autocratic institution that professes its liberal leanings. What "tyranny of the Other" (again from the curatorial statement) do we need to contend with when the institution shuts down a space of difference, thereby barring the mere entrance of the Other?

We don't want to form knee-jerk accusations against "authoritarian regimes," since we are well aware that such acts of censorship occur in so-called "democracies," where the tender sensibilities of citizens are paternalistically protected. In the case here, Wang Huangsheng, the museum director, states in the exhibition catalogue that,

"It is our sincere hope that your visual perceptions can get sharpened and imported by thinking, and your thinking can be further powered in your enquiring eyes."

What sincere hope can there be when blinders prevent vision and the possibilities for thinking are shut down? While we understand the need for local considerations, especially given that regionally the Guangdong Museum is known to be culturally open, we are dismayed that such openness has not extended to any direct communication with us.

We call on the museum to reinstate the installation in its full, intended form. More than that, we wish to open a dialogue with the museum, the curators and other artists about how these questions might be, if not resolved, at least addressed. As artists, we expect to be part of decision-making processes that profoundly intervene with our works' relationship to the audience, especially in exhibitions such as this that profess to develop new forms of cultural and social engagement.

Allan deSouza and Yong Soon Min, September 2008.