The Power of the Third Voice

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The Power of the Third Voice

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Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, Cambridge : Harvard University press, 2017. Sous la dir. de Kobena Mercer

Emilia Terracciano, *Art and Emergency: Modernism in Twentieth-Century India*, Londres : I.B. Tauris, 2018

Leon Wainwright, *Phenomenal Difference: A Philosophy of Black British Art*, Liverpool : Liverpool University Press, 2017, (Value : Art : Politics)

Rasheed Araeen, Zurich : JRP/Ringier, 2017. Sous la dir. de Nick Aikens

- 1 The publication of the three conferences given by Stuart Hall at Harvard in 1994 was necessary, three years after his death. As emphasized by Kobena Mercer in his introduction, they confirm the topicality of the theoretical propositions put forth by the author ever since the beginning of the 1960s, opening a new reflection field by making culture one of the approaches to theorising power relationships. According to Hall and all those working on social, colonial and postcolonial issues, the effects of migration on national constructs in the West, and particularly in colonising countries, created an upheaval by shifting forms of authority. The analysis of notions of race, ethnicity and nation that he articulated at the prestigious American university still resonate with the same acuity almost 25 years later. *The Fateful Triangle* offers a pleasant perspective: to be able to immerse in the reflections that coincided with the joint formulation of cultural and postcolonial theories, backed by different disciplines (such as comparative literature and political, social and art history), in a context affected by historical discontinuities. Although they are rooted in ideological, religious, ethnical and racial conflicts, these discontinuities produce cultural disjunctions, such as the German reunification in 1990, the first Gulf War, the Algerian civil war, the Oslo Accord in 1993, the Sarajevo siege from 1992 to 1996, and the official end of the South-African apartheid in 1994. The pleasure of

reading Stuart Hall partly comes from knowing his talks were public, and that his soft yet firm voice propounded major analyses. But it goes hand in hand with the bitterness, and even the disappointment, of seeing that years of intellectual struggle have not yet succeeded in transforming from the inside the dominant systems that still enable inequality, exploitation and rejection.

- 2 When Rasheed Araeen arrived in London from Karachi in 1964, he was 29. In the rich monography Nick Aikens devoted to him, he tells the author that racism was everywhere: “[...]. It was legal. There was no law against overt racism.” When his interlocutor asks how he decided to confront this racism, Araeen answers that, along with his artist and writer friends, amongst whom David Medella who was very militant, he chose to act by strengthening the ties between art and politics.¹ Araeen evokes all the notable events of the activism of minority communities in Thatcher-era Great Britain, and its repression by the police. He recounts the period, in 1978, when he and Mahmood Jamal created *Black Phoenix: Journal of Contemporary Art & Culture in the Third World*, in which he published his “BLACK MANIFESTO”.² Until 1979, the journal considered literary, artistic, and cultural productions by artists, writers and intellectuals that were involved in political anticolonial and postcolonial struggles. It particularly opposed all forms of discrimination, be they ethnicity-, race-, sex- or class-related. The articles in *Black Phoenix* were rooted in the dual reflection on postcolonial theory and postmodern theory that precisely served as structural bases for the conceptualization of *Third Text*, which Rasheed Araeen launched in 1987.
- 3 The cultural and literary British context into which *Third Text* was released was characterized by the annual holding of the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books, which between 1982 and 1995, was an opportunity for hundreds of publishers, writers and artists to converge in the United Kingdom from Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe, on the initiative of the organisers: New Beacon Books, Race Today Publications and Bogle L’Ouverture Publications³. During this period, huge realisations were underway in the intellectual and artistic fields. The world meetings were punctuated by discussion forums, workshops, screenings, exhibitions. Dialogues followed the wake of the Caribbean Artists Movement from the turn of the 1970s. In the United Kingdom, it was precisely the Caribbean community that originated the fair – the word “Black” includes all persons from Africa and Asia, as well as the African diaspora. Their aim was to connect with pan-African movements and struggles against colonization world-wide.
- 4 The use of the word “third” goes back to the 1950s and is rooted in a terminology inherited from the Bandung Conference in April 1955. It was during the Cold War and in the midst of decolonization, that the countries which had chosen not to belong to either of the two blocs convened in Indonesia. The position of “non-alignment” enabled them to reappropriate the concept of Third World as a strength rather than as a negative connotation. The struggle was also driven by the power of the economic system and its colonial hold. The visibility these countries gained facilitated a mix of cultures. The conference was presented as the first to display the demands of African and Asian nations, along with their desire for emancipation.
- 5 “Why *Third Text*?” asked the editorial of the first issue, in the Autumn of 1987.⁴ “But what do we mean by the word *Third*, if not that it obviously refers to the Third World? If *Third* signifies Third World, which it does, what is the nature of this representation? Is it already defined? If so, by whom? And is it possible to conceive of something around

which one can no longer draw a definite line? If we understand Third World as a geographical area, as it is implied in the slogans of the North-South dialogue, is the economic disparity between the rich nations of the West and the poverty of most Third World countries enough to define them separately and differently?"⁵ The intention here is to highlight the fact that these economic disparities (which also exist within non-Western countries – Rasheed Araeen mentions the cases of Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh) cannot define differences, which are determined by culture above anything else. A declaration then follows, that can serve as a necessary tool for theorizing the cultural production of all the agents involved in the epistemological shifts of the times in connection to contemporary art: "It is imperative to abandon the models of binary oppositions which impose fixed ordering systems, and according to which cultural practices are classified in terms of Same and Other. And it is to this end that considerations of art cannot be separated from questions of politics."⁶

- 6 What clearly appears here is that the economic, political and cultural domination of the Western world was no longer conceivable at a time when decentring had to favour de-hierarchised forms of exchange. Artists and intellectuals, involved in decolonisation movements within their respective countries, chose to reconsider power relationships by deconstructing the hegemonic approaches that had been imposed until then. The dynamics of *Third Text*, in the British context, were built upon numerous and remarkable initiatives going back to the 1960s. At that time, artists, poets and writers developed visual, literary, musical and theoretical propositions, that not only aimed at injecting political criticism to the prevailing system; but also to show how culture was an essential landmark in social activism. In this sense, the figure of Stuart Hall is instructive. He was the first editor-in-chief of the *New Left Review* in 1960, before founding the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, along with his colleagues Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart in 1964. He was born in Jamaica in 1932 and he emigrated to the United Kingdom in 1951 to study. Although he heavily relied on the philosophy of Antonio Gramsci in order to conceptualise the idea of "organic intellectual", his experience of migration enabled him to develop another fundamental notion: "articulation". The analysis of artistic practices shows that *Third Text* promoted the articulation of modernism and imperialism. It was clear to Stuart Hall that modernism as solely Western was unthinkable, since it was through modernist arts and culture that independence and emancipation were conceivable. The goal here was not so much to appropriate the codes that European practices imposed, but to appropriate the modalities of modernism - modernism was crucial for formal reflection and ideological positioning. In the bibliography of her erudite work *Art and Emergency: Modernism in Twentieth-Century India*, Emilia Terracciano mentions certain articles that were published in *Third Text*.⁷ Over the past 30 years, the journal helped build a solid and shared critical base by promoting artistic potential from all over the world. Through its monographic approach, it gave a voice to artists, art historians and writers who were working on subjects related to contemporary art. The monographic approach sheds light on works through contextual, historic and artistic interpretations, thus circumventing the pitfall of the thematic approach, which is most often relied on within usual frameworks. To connect themes (related to certain anthropological or sociological uses) to these practices prevents their modernity from expressing itself autonomously. In her book built around monographic case studies (Nasreen Mohamedi, Sunil Janah, Gagendranath Tagore), Emilia Terracciano connects history, memory and its sources (from Walter Benjamin to Frantz Fanon), thus opening a wider spectre to critical examination. In her conclusion, she emphasizes the

fact that she wanted to show how artists worked with “states of emergency”, and how artistic productions call for the political in times of extreme violence.⁸ In her text, the author draws, to a great extent, on European philosophy, and dedicates a short section to laughter as theorised by Henri Bergson at the end of her book.

- 7 Leon Wainwright also chose a philosophical approach in his book, *Phenomenal Difference: A Philosophy of Black British Art*. The art historian, who has often published on the subject, has written an ambitious study. However, its position may seem surprising. Although perception is at the centre of the apparatus which receives and represents the patterns of what constitutes difference, the many references he calls forth may not sufficiently contextualise the relationship between phenomenology and racism. This is the case, for instance, for what constitutes the parameters of difference.
- 8 Why did the author not choose, as the starting point for his reflection, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the impression his philosophy made on the dawn of the second part of the 20th century, and more particularly on the premises of the coming Civil Rights movement? Even though Leon Wainwright frequently refers to cultural studies, his very academic style is not wholly suited to the circulations and intricacies that are necessary in order to understand and convey the diversity of these subjects. Paradoxically, it seems that a more mobile and open style can sometimes be useful in order to demonstrate the ideas one has chosen to transmit. Stuart Hall, by emphasising the extent to which the diaspora has produced dislocation ever since the devastation represented by the enslavement of African people, shows how physical movement and displacement are “key elements of our current moment and also symptomatic of the wider consequences of global connectedness and disjuncture.”⁹
- 9 In *The Fateful Triangle*, Kobena Mercer insists on the fact that Stuart Hall stated the need for *translation*, which also means “moving across”: this is what migrants do, as figures whose two faces simultaneously gaze on either side.¹⁰ This is a beautiful image. Perhaps migration grants the gift of ubiquity, an asset for survival that leaves open the possibility for dialogue, and maybe even for hope.

NOTES

1. 1 “In Conversation: Nick Aikens and Rasheed Araeen”, *Rasheed Araeen*, Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2017, p. 202
2. “In Conversation: Nick Aikens and Rasheed Araeen”, *Op. cit.*, p. 206
3. For a complete history of this event, see, *A Meeting of the Continents, History, Memory, Organisation and Programmes 1982-1995: The International Bookfair of Radical Black & Third World Revisited*, London: New Beacon Books, George Padmore Institute, 2005. Ed. by Sarah White, Roxy Harris, Sharmilla Beekmohun
4. *Third Text*, no.1, Autumn 1987, p. 3
5. *Third Text*, no.1, *Op. cit.*, p. 3
6. *Ibid.*

7. Terracciano, Emilia. *Art and Emergency: Modernism in Twentieth-Century India*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2018. The mentioned articles are the following: Clifford, James. "The Others: Beyond the 'Salvage' Paradigm", *Third Text*, no.3/6, 1989, p. 73-77; Gupta, Atreye. "Dwelling in Abstraction: Post-Partition Segues into Postwar", *Third Text*, vol. 31, no.2/3, 2017 (special issue on partitions).
 8. Terracciano, Emilia. *Art and Emergency: Modernism in Twentieth-Century India*, *Op. cit.*, p. 184
 9. Hall, Stuart. *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, Cambridge: Harvard University press, 2017, p. 164. Ed. by Kobena Mercer
 10. Mercer, Kobena. "Introduction", *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, *Op. cit.*, p. 30
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Elvan Zabunyan is a contemporary art historian, a professor at the University Rennes 2 and an art critic. Her current research, to be published as a book, focuses on the legacy and memory of slavery in the Americas, in relationship to contemporary art. She recently published "Body and Soul" in *Adrian Piper: A Reader* (MoMA, 2018) and is co-editing the second issue of the periodical *Esclavages et Post-esclavages* (CIRES/CNRS, 2019), devoted to contemporary art and slavery. Her text "Face à l'Atlantique" is published in the volume retracing residencies at the semaphore of the Créac'h in Ouessant (FINIS TERRAE, 2018). She co-ordinates the WP 5 "Artists and Citizens" (which includes the cities of Marseilles, Bristol and Cape Town) for the European programme ECHOES (European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities) for the 2018-2021 period.