

Conference Report:
Diasporic Futures: Women, the Arts and Globalization

Diasporic Futures: Women, the Arts and Globalization was a collaborative event sponsored by The Centre for Research in Postcolonial and Transcultural Studies, Roehampton University, The School of Art and Design, Loughborough University and The Centre for Visual, Spatial and Material Culture, Kingston University. It was held on Monday 3rd July 2006 at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and was co-organised by **Dorothy Rowe**, (Roehampton University) **Marsha Meskimmon** (Loughborough University) and **Fran Lloyd** (Kingston University)

The conference theme was conceived in order to test the limits of extant maps of globalization, contemporary art practices and migration by exploring how women's creative practice operates within the dominant patterns of the marketplace and/or how it maps the world against the grain, developing alternative networks and new meanings. The emphasis upon 'futures' in the project's title was strategic; the conference aimed to develop the theoretical and methodological tools needed to move debates concerning diasporas, migration and identities forward, rather than to fix them in the historical past. In this sense, it both acknowledged and sought to develop current work in the field by seeking active collaboration with target audiences and participants for whom we hope the research will foster further strategies for the negotiation of globalized networks in gendered terms, as well as establishing effective collaborative networks to contribute towards new understandings of transnational and transcultural practices.

The day began with a keynote lecture delivered by internationally renowned visual artist **Sutapa Biswas**, (University of the Arts, London), entitled Strategies and Breakdowns/Epiphanies and Self-Preservation. The lecture aimed to acknowledge the complexity of the terrain which as an artist Biswas has had to tread. On the one hand acting as a catalyst - engaging with discourses around post-colonialism, gender and identity, and its interface with the visual arts, and on the other hand, developing a visual syntax within her artistic practices which intellectually pushes the boundaries of our expectations and deliberately defies what an artist of her gender, race and class might be expected to do within the context of her visual practice. In the context of Diasporic Futures Biswas took us through some of the educational projects that she has worked on as an artist, contesting an essentialist reading of either race or diaspora, as well as discussing the work of some of her students at the Chelsea College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London, in order to amplify her theme. The keynote was then followed by a morning panel of three papers. **Gaye Chan** (University of Hawaii) and **Nandita Sharma** (York University, Toronto) delivered a wonderfully engaging and humorous introduction to three of their collaborative activist art projects, designed in response to capitalist globalization and as a means of resistance and intervention: A Dot and a Line was a project concerned with the arbitrariness of border-making, There, There was concerned with the erasure of work and the valorisation of leisure within capitalist economies, whilst Eating in Public was concerned to reinvigorate the demand for common property, inspired by the historical Diggers of the seventeenth century. **Alpesh Patel** (University of Manchester) followed with a presentation entitled Mapping the South Asian Diaspora through the Queer and Gendered Artist's Body in which he delineated his intention to turn the idea of the 'Brown Atlantic' borrowed from the title of Paul Gilroy's hugely influential 1992 study of The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness from concept to methodology. His talk offered many exciting visual examples of both artworks and curatorial practices, mainly from New York, which were proposed as examples of alternative ways of selecting works of art for display that resisted the checklist of positive discrimination that Patel suggested had ghettoised many of the mainstream art institutional approaches to female South Asian art in New York. Patel was negotiating the same delicate path also raised by Biswas in her introductory lecture, of how useful or not the category of diaspora actually is to many black and asian artists today. This troubled definition of diaspora, initially raised by audience member **Pauline de Souza** (University of East London) was an issue that became a leit motif for the day that sadly due to restrictions of time was not properly aired in discussion this time but which the organisers feel very strongly should be returned to in any subsequent follow-up event. Patel's presentation was followed with a talk by **Visnja Majewski** (University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia) on Affective Memory in the Australian Croat Diaspora in which she presented her research as a practitioner into the dominant signifier-memory-affect structure within Croat ethnic identification in the Australian diaspora in order to develop an understanding of the workings of transnational and transcultural memory and identity. A response to the morning session was then provided by **Amna Malik** (Slade School of Art, University of London) who carefully weaved together some strands from the diversity of the morning session for further discussion and reflection, focusing in particular on the relationship between the formation of diasporic identities for the newly arrived migrant with the concept of memory, forgetting and erasure, calling for new models of thinking that do not erase the past in the rush to embrace the future. The afternoon session began with a reflection on her performance piece Magdalena Makeup, by performance artist **Lena Šimić** (University of Lancaster) dressed as alter ego 'Magdalena' in red satin, a blonde wig and ruby lipstick. The title of her presentation Name Post Card Encounters Journey Home, considered her live art event, Magdalena Makeup, which took place in Dubrovnik, Croatia and Liverpool, UK in 2004 and which explored the notion of 'home' as an attempt to connect/juxtapose two cities: Liverpool (artist's resident home) and Dubrovnik (artist's place of birth). These two cities become connected through the act of sending postcards, initiated by the members of audience and also during this event, by conference participants at the V&A, all of whom were provided with a postcard to return to Magdalena in Dubrovnik. This was followed by a presentation from artist **Françoise Dupré** (University of Central England, Birmingham) entitled Fujaan and de fil en aiguille...snáth nasc, roughly translated as From Thread to Needle which took place at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin in 2004 and was a collaborative, textile based creative art project which was used to explore ideas concerning the development of meaningful and ethical exchanges and art making; and a consideration of the possibilities for a practice of cultural resistance against globalisation and its reductive and consuming approach to artwork and culture. Visual artist **Mohini Chandra** (Oxford Brookes University) spoke next about her diasporic practices as an artist in a talk entitled Imaginary Edens. Chandra gave an engaging visual presentation about her major project of the last decade, 'Travels in a New World', which incorporates photography, film, video, sound and other time based and installation media. Her work raises questions of identity and location through an exploration of the uses of vernacular photography and the Studio Portrait photograph, which neatly picked up on Chan and Sharma's earlier considerations of the role of the studio photograph in legitimizing capitalist practices. This practitioner-based afternoon session ended before tea with a presentation by digital photo artist, **Roshini Kempadoo** (University of East London). The presentation was based on her multi-media artwork Ghosting. As a contemporary response to the Caribbean colonial plantation and its demise, it explored the topography of the plantation and its surrounding areas as a site of struggle. The artwork fictionalises scenarios based on three women characters in which relationships are re-negotiated between the characters as ex-slaves, indentured labourers and landowners, and their changing relationship to the land as an economic source of survival. Kempadoo took us through the narrative of the

piece and showed us installation shots of the work as an interactive piece. All four speakers in this session raised many exceedingly pertinent issues in relation to contemporary arts practices and the materialisation of feminine subjective identities through art making. Issues of artistic process and context were central issues for all four speakers, as was the negotiation of feminine identities and the possibilities for creating Utopian spaces through creative practices as a counter to the dystopic conditions of contemporary global capitalism. After the tea break, the final session of the day saw **Suzanna Chan** (University of Ulster) deliver a paper entitled *Diaspora Cyberspaces: critical identities and anti-racism in cyberfeminist arts*. Her presentation considered a range of artists' websites in order to explore how first and second generation immigrant women and women artists of colour based in the US, Britain and Ireland, explore practices of difference by creating diasporic cyberspaces. This was followed by a presentation from **Katy Deepwell** (University of the Arts, London) entitled *Global vs. transnational vs. international visions of the art world* which offered a reflection on her role as editor of the journal *n.paradoxa*, now 9 years in print, and which began as an online journal as a platform on which different and divergent views of feminism's relationship to contemporary art produced by women could be discussed. In her presentation Deepwell considered what is at stake in pursuing a feminist politics of transnational exchange in relation to a critique of feminism as dominated solely by Anglo-American voices, some theories of globalization and the question of knowledge production. A thoughtful and reflective response to both papers, as well as a set of concluding remarks to the day was given by **Sue Malvern** (University of Reading) who concluded with the cogent opinion that it was time to develop a new vocabulary for feminism that would lead it firmly into the future as a vital and necessary political force in the changed transnational landscape in which, as this conference amply demonstrated, we all find ourselves.

Finally, there was a deliberate and weighted emphasis on the role of practitioners to the debates that the organisers wished to present through this conference and so throughout the day, during morning registration, coffee, tea and lunch breaks, there was an exhibition of artworks by photography and performance artist **Oreet Ashery** entitled *Village Series I, II, III 2006* which consisted of digital drawings and archival ink jet prints (Artists' proofs of large scale images) in which fictional village landscapes are constructed from illustration, media images, news reports and graphic novels. The images looked to the future with a sense of paranoia, alienation, fear and a flat sense of existence. In addition, there was a video programme entitled *Women's Love*, a selection from a series of short videos by international women artists selected by Oreet. The films were characterised by a low-fi aesthetic and challenged the notion of what 'love' might be relation to a sense of identity governed by the internet, the media, globalisation, conflicts, and economy.

The atmosphere of the day was extremely open; both audience and participants engaged in lively discussions both within the formal discussion periods and outside them in the breaks. The organisers hope to continue the spirit of the event with a follow-up publication.

Report by Dorothy Rowe, Roehampton University, July 2006