Theory and Practice of Authenticity in Global Cultural Production

Subproject C: Authenticity and Hybridity in Culture, Art and Architecture of the Greater Middle East

The past decade has witnessed the fast-paced creation of new art centres in the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf Nations, which are mainly (Dubai, Abu Dhabi) or partly (Doha, Qatar) modelled on Western traditions. Subproject C examines the ways in which this cloning, transplanting or “translating” of Western education and art institutions and museums (e.g. Abu Dhabi: Sorbonne, New York University, Louvre, Uffizi, Guggenheim) highlights the paradoxical nature of “authenticity” when it occurs in a society largely unaffected by Western definitions of civilisation and art – even though the elite of these societies has been educated in the West. Furthermore, it uncovers how these adoptive processes are modelled on tactics developed by today’s global cultural consumer and brand capitalism. Thus, within the context of creative economies, the brand culture of the corporate, economic realm has expanded to encompass the cultural realm to the extent that these previously distinct domains today are becoming increasingly indistinguishable. Examining this phenomenon within an interdisciplinary framework (at the intersection of postcolonial, poststructuralist and visual culture studies and critique as well as translation studies) allows examining to what extent “authenticity is strategically used by Western institutions, yet radically destabilized in a different, non-Western environment.” To exemplify the heuristic force (and possible limitations) of the key concept of cultural translation theorized by Homi K. Bhabha in The Location of Culture, we will also consider Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses as the first novel that centrally thematizes and enacts the transformations that result from these global processes, and reveals “authenticity” as a construct. Subproject C seeks to document this tension as symptomatic of cultural globalization at large. Specifically, the project will provide answers to the following questions:

— How does the actual cultural transfer from West to East and East to West take place and what role does the aesthetic-ethical category of “authenticity” play within this process?
— What comes to the fore through the transmission or “translation” of one culture to the other?
— What role do museums play in this process, as institutions relying on branding strategies through corporate design and identity (in architecture, collection profiles, display forms and so on)?
— What are the consequences of such an exchange for both the artifacts and the importing and exporting cultures respectively?
— How are these exchanges staged, sold, and legitimized?

The doctoral project (by MA Jasmin Chanine) will particularly focus on how the aforementioned states of the Greater Middle East develop different cultural and economic strategies in positioning themselves in the emerging art scenes in the Islamic world. It analyzes the consequences of these emerging art scenes for the social and cultural development of the region and its local communities, and what impact this increasingly visible cultural space has in the West.
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