First Steps in the Third Space: negotiating a new visual language through Australian-Chinese collaboration

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Abstract

The paper outlines a unique cultural collaboration involving Australian and Chinese artists in which Homi Bhabha's third space theories are examined from the perspective of a mediated visual language.

While Bhabha proposes a third space incommensurate within social and political contexts, the project examines the counter theories by which productive and creative spaces are offered to artists through intercultural collaboration, privileging visuality as a language to re-propose perceived barriers of cultural difference. The project examines a new visual language that celebrates misinterpretation, misrepresentation and misunderstanding, a language in which images represent individual and collective identities that have been examined from an intercultural collaborative perspective.

The exponential growth of digital technology enables the interchange of theoretical and artistic ideas to take place at a distance in ways that are interactive, immediate and unexpected. The paper will also include an examination of this virtual technology as a platform for creative engagement, and offer a critique of the implications of a "neutral" working space that is seemingly borderless and yet resultantly dynamic.

Through this project, the arguments surrounding the validity of national identities within a modern hybrid society are examined. In the process of evaluating our own identities as artists and writers, the authors acknowledge the necessity to unlearn what we have learned and to recognise the emancipatory potential of a politics of difference, where incommensurability is negotiated as an inescapable facet of globalised and multicultural existence.

Introduction

The authors outline the theoretical perspective of the project and investigate the interactive and dynamic working space in which the artists are collaborating, where the Internet plays a central role in developing inter-subjective visual communications. The paper is organised into two parts: the first section details the project and associated theories and considers the project participants in relation to the theoretical framework, the second section examines the Internet as a productive platform for reflexive creative collaboration. The collaborative project spans a two-year period to allow the individuals involved to develop a strong connection with each other and for the project to have multiple outcomes. These include: two collaborative exhibitions, one in China, and the other in Australia, a publication and a number of conference presentations in both countries.

The project and associated theories

Third Space is a collaborative project involving art and design students at the University of Shanghai for Science & Technology, China and the School of Communications & Arts, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia. The project commenced with the Australian students visiting Shanghai in April 2010 and the Shanghai students visiting Perth in September 2011. These meetings were intended to forge collaborative partnerships and for the participants to be exposed to the respective cultural contexts with the intention of working towards an exhibition planned for both Shanghai and Perth in 2012/2013.

The project attempts to forge a creative and collaborative relationship between staff and students in two countries, working both independently and in partnership. This shared form of collaboration places certain demands on the artists, such as surrendering the individual right of ownership of the work along with many established methodologies of art production that are common to both western and Chinese cultures. This collaborative approach has promoted the need for individuals to communicate across

languages or more precisely, use visual art *as* a language, as a common form of understanding. Within the spirit of sharing both ideas and creative experiments, artworks in this project have been exchanged and re-worked by the artistic partners a number of times to both share ownership and to develop the notion of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994).

China and Australia share the common ground of having long traditions of cultural heritage through synchronic Indigenous cultures that have been maintained within growing diasporic societies. However, whereas modern Australia often denies its Aboriginal heritage, China is debating how to preserve and celebrate its long-standing Indigenous traditions within its growing internationalised and hybridised communities. This, at least in the short term, has created a cultural collision, a notional space between cultures or what Homi Bhabha refers to as *the third space* (Bhabha, 1994).

While Bhabha proposes a third space that is a collision of cultures and as such incommensurate within social and political contexts, he also argues that this is an extremely productive space where meanings can be made through cultural difference. This visual art project uses Bhabha's and other intercultural theories by which productive and creative spaces are offered to artists through intercultural collaboration. We adopt this theoretical position to enable us to privilege visuality as a language to re-propose perceived barriers of cultural difference. The project examines a new visual language that celebrates misinterpretation, misrepresentation and misunderstanding, a language in which images represent individual and collective identities that have been examined from an intercultural perspective. Bhabha explains the third space in these terms:

> The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space – a third space – where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences … Hybrid hyphenisations emphasize the incommensurable elements as the basis of cultural identities.[i]

This *transformative* space has been extrapolated upon by such writers as Ien Ang, a Chinese–Australian theorist in her comment on Felski's paper *"The Doxa of Difference"*[ii]. In her paper *"The Uses of Incommensurability"* she discusses the meaning of "identity" and "togetherness" in the context of how we live together in the 21st century. Ang highlights the breakdown of cultural boundaries in a growingly interconnected and interdependent globalised world, and suggests that the moments of incompatibility that occur between cultural groups are crucial in forming our new complex hybrid societies. Her observation about language within this incompatible space offers us a freedom to work as artists, designers and collaborators: "It does not imply an absolute impossibility of communication, but relates to the occasional and interspersed moments of miscommunication (or breakdown of communication) that always accompany communicative interchanges between differently positioned subjects"[iii].

In addition to the role that mis-communication can play, there is also a view that our cultural identity is more dependent on the present than our history. The book *Complex Entanglements Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference*[iv] edited by Nikos Papastergiadis is an anthology of diverse positions on postcolonial theory, for example Papastergiadis asserts, "that *what* we are is *where* we are now, rather than where we were from"[4] suggesting that our cultural histories have little bearing on our current identity within a modern hybrid society.

These diverse notions of cultural space, both physical and philosophical, form the basis of the project. These spaces of tension and uncertainty, created often by misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the spoken language can we would assert, provide an exciting and fertile space for the artist. Subsequently therefore for our project, it can allow the participants to engage in dialogue about important issues surrounding their own identities and shared values. To galvanise this, as a starting point for the collaborative project we asked the participants to consider such issues as:

- What contributes to our personal identity and how we represent it
- Personal versus cultural identity, and how this is constructed
- Migrant versus indigenous identity
- The speed of globalisation and how this impacts upon our identity and view of the world
- Multiculturalism and hybridity
- Cultural stereotypes

- Abstract languages formed by mis-communication
- Similarities and differences
- Ownership and belonging

It is of interest to note at this preliminary stage of the research most of the participants were drawn to issues surrounding identity and to what extent personal and national identity is lost through migration and globalisation. In relation to this, Chinese Australian artist William Yang recalls the story made famous in its re-telling in his art performance entitled *Sadness:*

> As a child it never occurred to me that I was Chinese and of a different race from other Australians. Someone at school called me "Ching Chong Chinaman". I was six. I went home to my mother and asked if I was Chinese: "I'm not am I?" My mother replied with great severity: "You are". It was her tone that shocked me. I understood immediately that being Chinese was some terrible curse and I could not rely on my mother for any help, or my elder brother for that matter, who chimed in with the authority of someone who was four years older and so much more experienced in the world: "Yes you are Chinese and you'd better get used to it". So my first feelings about being Chinese were entirely negative and they remained that way for over thirty years.[v]

Like William Yang, the student and staff groups involved in the visual art project come from varied backgrounds. The Chinese students are from different provinces and histories but collectively share common cultural values that date thousands of years. Although Papastergiadis would argue that this might have little bearing on their current attitudes, there is notably a very strong sense of national identity that has formed their political and cultural values. The Australian artists on the other hand are from a number of countries including United Kingdom, the Middle-East, North America, China and Australia and as such present a multi-cultural migrant group. Their histories are affected little by Australian Indigenous histories that are often denied through colonial settlement and migration. In these cases the artists bring to the project cultural assumptions that are both perceived and experiential, and reflect hybrid cultural values brought about through diaspora.

One of the Australian based artist's Nathan Stevens, is from North America and as part of his collaboration with Chinese artist Liu Qingqing has involved a blog entitled "How Did The Artists Convince The World it Exists?" in which he reflects on Papastergiadis's notion of *now* versus *then*. He comments:

> This notion is of course contextual, in that our present context, being a matrix of our own trajectories (and histories), culminates in what we perceive as our current situation through which we create identification of self and other within various relational contexts, i.e. ontological, phenomenological, etc. In other words, our present context carries more weight in our understanding of who or what we are in comparison to the limiting perspective offered through the lens of all other past contexts. This train of thought seems to lead towards that old "the end of history" line. Are we continuously forgetting our past in exchange for a fresh mind for an open future, free from the restraints of historical ideology?[vi]

The question of negotiating a future that is bound with the traditions of the past is an area that seems to interest the Chinese students far more than the Australians. This is speculative at this stage and we will be interested to see if this remains the case. This may be understandable if they assume they have more to lose in the process of cultural cleansing as a means to re-directing a hybrid post modernist future that is characterised by external histories rather than long standing local traditions. Through the lens of reflective practice, Edward Kus's comments on Chinese identity from the perspective of "othering" touch on the central themes of this project, he asserts:

> The West has played *some* role in shaping Chinese identity because of the role of the "other" that the west occupies in the Chinese psyche. An individual, group or society is most easily defined in terms of what it is not, and the Chinese-West division has traditionally served as an

immutable dichotomy from which the Chinese could define from the project, their own conception of identity.[vii]

In this respect the project offers both a theoretical and practical space in which notions of *each other* can be investigated.

The Internet as a productive platform for reflexive creative collaboration

Another important element of this project was how to construct a productive space that would enable an ongoing collaboration when the participants were in their own geographical spaces. We decided to use the mediated space of the Internet for the participants to engage with one another. For us, this mediated context was a means of reflecting Bhabha's notional and theoretical space in which virtuality plays an important and central role. Students work within a file transfer protocol (FTP) arena, a virtual web-space that is dedicated to the collaborative groups. The virtual working space is our attempt to construct a level of neutrality, an important element of any collaboration and one that perhaps counters the polarity of the artists in their particular physical and geographical situations. As the very act of using the Internet at once positions the user within a global network – therefore despite possible incommensurate meanings, there is a shared context in which to develop communication.

Third Space constructs a social space for creative communications and the Internet has a facilitating role for the collaborations. Due to the geographical dislocation of the participants, the Internet arguably acts as a *third space* in a Bhabha sense – that is, a space of contestation. This *in-between* space is where the collaborators can exchange ideas, share visual work and ultimately build artworks together, in communication with each *other*. This is the philosophy of the *Third Space* exchange, to construct a creative context that encourages debate and collaborative interaction. Central for our consideration is how can this exchange be facilitated productively, and what role can the virtual space of the Internet play in engendering this?

In attempting to work out how best to engender collaboration in the *Third Space* project the following details prominent writers in the field of Internet politics. In building networks of meaning amongst individual actors, political theorist Peter Dahlgren suggests that the Internet is a context where productive exchange can take place; he outlines in *Reconfiguring Civic Culture in the New Media Milieu* that "the kind of citizenship envisioned on … websites is one that is *constituted in and through* practices"[viii]. We concur with Dahlgren as the *Third Space* project is developed through practice, through creative participation exchanged and acted upon within the physical and virtual realms. Both within the others geographical locations, and developed online. We would argue that the individual artists in the collaboration form a community of sorts in a social sense, acknowledging cultural differences based upon geographical location and social, historical and political circumstance. The virtual space for this collaboration therefore has a significant role to play, and due to the nature of the collaboration extends beyond a simple repository of information, and becomes an active space, facilitating a social context.

The Internet in this instance provides an opportunity to become a public space for social interactions of meaning, where the importance lies in constructing social sites for productive exchange that can be creatively and reflexively engaged with. In the same way as sociolgist Nick Couldry acknowledges Hannah Arendt's proposition, that "sites are connected, through a multitude of links into a public space of shared significance and meaning"[ix]. We too wish to construct collaborations that go beyond an uncritical exchange into a dynamic and critically reflexive space. This demands the adoption of a reflexive praxis that encourages respect, engages with ethics, and acknowledges difference.

We use reflexivity in the way it is espoused by Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash, "Through that we might renew … social action"[x]. What reflexivity provides for us, is the underlying principle, at the very core of the reflexive act, that there needs to be cognition of ethical, social and historical awareness, in order to negotiate the enumerable complexities in any given situation – and this art collaboration is no different. Acting reflexively for us is of primary concern when working within this intercultural collaboration. We stress that, in any reflexive act, there has to be an acknowledgement (not in any tokenistic sense) of difference, intersubjectivity and power relations, "Reflexive analysis is thus invested with critical potency and emancipatory potential"[xi]. Of ultimate importance is consideration of both individual involvement and collaborative artistic practices. Integral to this is rethinking the role of pedagogy within a visual practice, not as an elitist venture but as a system of

mutual exchange – evermore important within this tertiary exchange between China and Australia. Through the visual, *Third Space* considers multiple ways to enable new creative communications, offering scope for new ways of thinking to be developed, new visual communication forms to be established, for contradictions to be worked through and potentially reinterpreted. These are central tenets of reflexivity and are essential for the success of the *Third Space* creative collaboration.

Collaborative practice has a correlation to the reflexive theories discussed, as it relies on productive communication between individuals, and that this communication results in agreed understanding. It sets up a site for negotiation where the individuals concerned attempt to identify strengths and weaknesses to reach a level of consensus. Can the virtual world provide productive aspects for creative collaborations? Can digital tools develop communications amongst individuals that are bound by the social world, albeit in this case who are individuals from different geographical and cultural contexts? The efficacy of the Internet then as a productive space for developing creative communications across these 'real world' interactions is held to account.

Increasingly digital and virtual technologies impact upon the lifeworld, and often blur distinctions between the real and the constructed. The Internet assumes a central role in this blurring and arguably in this instance can stand in for *real* interactions. It is how these real spaces, can best facilitate intersubjectivity within the project, as Zizek asserts:

> The true question apropos of cyberspace and Virtual Reality is not 'What happens to our experience of reality?' (i.e. all the boring trendy variations in 'Is real reality turning into just another cyberspace window?') but, rather: 'How does the interposition of the World Wide Web affect the status of intersubjectivity?' [xii]

Zizek's point has direct relation to the construction of social networks so it is important to therefore question how intersubjective dialogues take place within this medium. Mediation is central to this dialogue, and provides us with complex relations in society and intersects all aspects of the lifeworld. Theorist and philospher Jurgen Habermas' requirement of the informal public sphere is that it "has the advantage of a medium of unrestricted communication"[xiii] and is about building identities. The Internet provides both of these aspects to some degree. It helps build identities; this can have both positive and detrimental consequences. We would attest, community, relationships and a person's identity, are constructed and formed by this new context, meaning real world interactions are tempered by this medium as it constructs new ways to communicate. This is what we are doing via this project, developing visual communications that are culturally hybrid.

Third Space uses the Internet as a social network to help develop social relations between the participants, as Barry Wellman states "Computer networks are inherently social networks linking people, organizations, and knowledge. They are social institutions that should not be studied in isolation but as integrated into everyday lives"[xiv]. Extrapolating from Wellman, we are using the Internet as a platform for our visual exchange concerning individual's identities in relation to hybridity and in negotiating with the *other* in developing real world interactions via both physical and virtual world connections.

In Summation

The *Third* Space project seeks to develop social networks through intercultural collaboration by privileging visual language to build a sense of community, disseminate creative work that is the result of an ongoing dialogue and most importantly to enrich each of the participant's respective lifeworlds. This project provides an opportunity to privilege visuality as a means to productively develop communication that does not only rely on the spoken or written word. The project took the participants out of the comfort of their cultural and geographical locales, and situated them within a new geographical and cultural space. These exchanges were most productive for the success of the project, as each of the participants became immersed within their partner's location, therefore gaining an understanding of their respective lifeworlds. We are not suggesting that within such a short time they could understand each other's lifeworld's fully, but what we are suggesting is that this project went some way in developing productive intercultural communications beyond the prescriptive. By negotiating with each *other* through the visual, the artists enter into a creative *third space* that shares much with theorist Stuart Hall's analysis of photographic images exhibited at *Documenta 11*:

> It [the photographs] recognizes that we all come from somewhere, speak from some place, are multiply positioned and in that sense 'located'… it refuses to be rendered motionless by place, origin, race, color, or ethnicity. It knows that identity is always constructed within, not outside, representation and used the symbolic space of the image to explore, construct and at the same time go beyond identity.[xv]

The *Third Space* project aims to privilege visual language to help build new cultural dialogues between Chinese and Australian staff and students. These collaborative practices use the Internet as a social space for reflexive creative dialogue. This is not a retreat into virtuality, but rather it is about the relationship the virtual has with the physical, as a means to add productively to our lifeworlds, and for this project as a vehicle that crosses geographical and cultural boundaries. The *Third Space* project attempts to challenge preconceived notions of identity and through intercultural collaboration celebrates the processes of misinterpretation, misrepresentation and misunderstanding that have been central to this exchange. Through this ongoing creative process we intend to continue establishing new networks of meaning, new representations and new visual communicative spaces.

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