

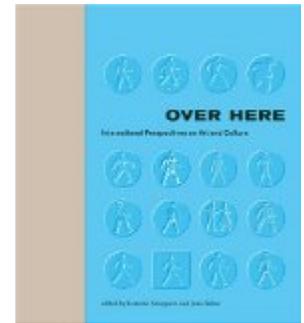
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gerardo Mosquera, Jean Fisher, eds. *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. 431 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-13440-8.

Reviewed by Jessica Winegar (Department of Anthropology, Fordham University)
Published on H-Gender-MidEast (August, 2006)



Opacity, Cultural Translation, and Peripheral Art

Over Here is a collection of essays by curators, critics, and artists from around the world which seeks to challenge the dominant Western frameworks for understanding art and cultural practice. It is a major contribution to the now burgeoning body of work on contemporary art from international critical perspectives, because it brings together insights from diverse geographic, cultural, institutional, artistic, and theoretical locations. The collection not only provides some fresh perspectives on international artistic practice, it also offers interesting approaches to understanding the phenomena of modernity, postcolonialism, globalization, cultural representation, translation, and diasporic and exilic cultural production.

Over Here is intended as a kind of update or companion volume to *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (published by the same entities in 1990) which addressed the issue of how certain groups marked by gender, race, class, and sexuality become marginalized in dominant (Western) culture. *Over Here* takes stock of the recent phase of technological globalization, and the “internationalization” of the art world, and addresses the complicated ways that power now works in the cultural realm.

The essays were compiled by editors Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher—well-known art theorists who have been extremely influential in exposing the exclusive power of Euro-American art theory and institutions to select, disregard, and interpret art made by cultural others. The publication of this book by New York’s New

Museum of Contemporary Art in cooperation with MIT Press, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, indicates that the early work of Mosquera, Fisher, and others has now produced a major area of critical inquiry which can no longer be ignored in the international art scene.

The book is divided into four sections. “Unbounded Totalities” contains essays that address the varied ways in which globalization and artistic practice have disrupted totalizing (and often colonial) concepts of bounded cultures and traditions. “Transnational Circuits” looks at how the global circulation of art, artists, critics, and curators has resulted in new struggles to represent and define places, art, and artworks. The issues of gate-keeping, museum representation, resistance, and new diasporic forms of community-building are central here, and indeed this section seems to fit the premise of the book most closely. “Dis-positions,” the editors argue, contain essays which show how “neutral subjects” deal with this new situation by “responding independently and spontaneously outside of established political positions and [are] therefore capable of opening up a new ethical and collective space of action” (p. 7). The essays contained in this section are intriguing studies of (or testimonies from) particular artists or groups of artists, and suggest diverse ways in which people engage with or create new transnational circuitry. The final section is titled “Heteroglossia: The Hermeneutic Trap” and the essays address cross-cultural, cross-historical appropriation and resignification and, most intriguingly, the “innovative play of the untranslatable” (p. 7).

As with any edited collection, some essays are stronger than others. The most compelling contributions are those that bring new theoretical perspectives to bear on particular cases, especially specific artists, artworks, or institutional settings. For example, in the section “Unbounded Totalities,” Geeta Kapur’s essay “When Was Modernism in Indian Art?” takes on the relationship between modernity and modernization in a (post)colonial context and illuminates how that specificity produces a different shape and trajectory of artistic modernism. Chang Tsong-zung follows with a brilliant piece on contemporary Chinese art in a (post)socialist context, arguing that the “radical vanguard” of artists, while highlighting some of the ironies of state power, have actually reproduced dominant state ideologies regarding revolution, progress, and modernization.

In the section “Transnational Circuits,” John Clark’s essay on Chinese artists in France uses concrete examples to show how artists combine specific Chinese and Western references, and highlights how certain combinations result in certain artists being favored over others. Apinan Poshyananda highlights the dilemma facing diaspora artists who are judged as “either not original or not exotic enough” (p. 189). Marian Pastor Roces contributes an extremely evocative essay comparing Victorian England’s display of imperialism through the Crystal Palace exhibition with today’s widely famed new biennials that have sprung up all over the world. She argues that these biennials are not the democratizing forces that they claim to be but are also machineries of power, particularly of those nation-states and cities that sponsor them.

Jalal Toufic’s essay “Transit Visa to Postwar Lebanon!” in the “Dis-positions” section discusses works made by Lebanese artists dealing with the civil war and the Israeli invasions of Lebanon. It is a meditation on what happens when a “radical closure” is claimed on historical trauma, and how art work takes up the task of resurrecting the dead, of highlighting the impossibility or pretension of closure. Artist Everlyn Nicodemus’ moving essay in the same section provides a nice counterpoint, showing how “personal and historical trauma” (p. 266) can be expressed in a therapeutic sense through art work.

One of the gems of the concluding “Heteroglossia” section is the idea that translation is not about one culture adopting wholesale the forms or ideas of another culture, nor does it provide a pure mirror reflection of one culture to another. Rather, translation is an interpretive interplay that creates something new. Nikos Pa-

pastergiadis best illustrates this idea theoretically, while Angela Dimitrakaki shows it in action when discussing the difficulties of translation experienced in an international exhibition involving British and Estonian women artists.

The weaker essays of the collection suffer from abstruse language that aims at a high theoretical register but ends up being vaguer than necessary. However, this confusion may be the result of translation, as some of the more opaque essays were originally written in foreign languages. This is one way, although perhaps not the best one, that the reader could confront some of the issues of translation (and the assumption that there can ever be an “accurate” translation) that several of the essays discuss.

In a brilliant move, the editors distributed throughout the book artist Francis Alÿs’ series of black-and-white images of pedestrian crossing lights from around the world, from Rangoon to Mexico. The works provide a visual accompaniment to many of the issues discussed in the book, especially the problematics of similarity and difference, communication, translation, and technology. These and other artworks shown in various essays provoke the reader to ponder how art work is produced outside and through the “West” in complicated circuits of translation, and within certain fields of signification.

Yet one wishes that the visual component of the volume was more substantive. Many of the essays would have benefited from the inclusion of images, especially those more abstruse essays discussed above. Other essays in which the visual took a more central role mostly included images by artists who have been recognized in international avant-garde circles.

It would have been especially useful to have more presentation and discussion of work by artists working outside the so-called West who have not yet, or perhaps never could be, crowned as “avant-garde” by mainstream arts institutions either in the metropole or in their home societies. To include such work that is less easily “translatable” would have greatly enhanced several of the authors’ points, for example Édouard Glissant’s essay advocating opacity, Nikos Papastergiadis’ insights on the limits of cultural translation, and Angela Dimitrakaki’s comments on peripheral art appearing retrograde to curators burdened with Western linear notions of modernity.

And finally, it would have been interesting to see more self-reflection from those writers and curators who

have arguably been incorporated into the mainstream international avant-garde (they are, after all, in a book published by a major art museum and funded by a major foundation). What precipitated this acceptance of their work? What effects has this acceptance had on their radical projects? Caroline Ponce de Leon's essay on her personal experiences with the different worlds for Latin American/Latino art is a fine example of how one moves (or is allowed to move) from periphery to center, and one wishes there had been more essays of this nature.

Yet these minor criticisms should not detract from the importance of this volume. Indeed, *Over Here* should be read by everyone involved in the contemporary art

scene, and many of the essays will ALSO be extremely useful to scholars of contemporary literature, cultural studies, modernity, and postcolonialism. It will hopefully encourage readers to recognize that whatever art from "over there" is presented "over here" has already been made, selected, and interpreted according to certain influences, histories, and frameworks. Furthermore, the categories "over here" and "there" are constantly shifting and imbricated with one another. As the title of the collection and the essays within it show, "over here" highlights both the "distance and proximity," the sense of stability and indeterminacy, and the sense of knowing yet not knowing, that defines much international cultural production today.

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Citation: Jessica Winegar. Review of Mosquera, Gerardo; Fisher, Jean, eds., *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. August, 2006.

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