



Summer School "Seeing Matter(s): Materiality and Visuality". Prof. Christiane Brosius; Prof. Barbara Mittler; Prof. Sumathi Ramaswamy, 29.07.2012-04.08.2012.

Reviewed by Marlène Harles

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## Summer School "Seeing Matter(s): Materiality and Visuality"

The role of visual and material culture in the context of transcultural exchange processes between Asia and Europe was the topic of the summer school "Seeing Matter(s): Materiality and Visuality", which took place from July 29 to August 4, 2012, at the Karl Jaspers Centre in Heidelberg. It was organised by Christiane Brosius (Heidelberg) together with Barbara Mittler (Heidelberg) and Sumathi Ramaswamy (Durham), coordinators of project B4 "Transcultural Visuality" at the Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context". A group of 20 Master and PhD candidates and more than 10 scholars from various countries and academic disciplines, such as history, art history, literature studies, the social sciences and anthropology, discussed the manifold interrelations of materiality and visibility. They focused on encounters with things, practices of seeing, transferring, collecting, framing, and representing objects.

On Monday, July 30th, the Summer School kicked off with the participant's presentations of their individual research focus and material. Visualized through posters, these presentations addressed important topics and raised interesting questions, such as how to deal with the sensory experience of objects and how seeing is both personal and culturally influenced. The examples the students engaged with ranged from magic lantern slides, films, and postcards to contemporary art markets, Muslim popular visual culture, performance, or "Indian Wear".

The day concluded with the first keynote lecture by KENNETH GEORGE (Madison). The anthropologist presented a paper entitled "Companionable Objects, Com-

panionable Conscience: Reflections on Sunaryo's Titik Nadir". He started his lecture addressing the ways in which people dwell with things, how objects become companions and how people attribute conscience to objects? Turning to the Indonesian art world, he presented a work by the artist Sunaryo Soetono. Titled Titik Nadir ("The Low Point"), this work was created at the fall of Soeharto's regime in 1998. The anthropologist argued that Sunaryo's wrapping up of art pieces, which was the central part of this work, was an iconoclastic gesture that gave form to the ways in which the artist dealt with the collapse of the national order, the situation of the local art world and his own conscience.

The topic of the presentations held on Tuesday, July 31st, was "Delicate Materials: Embodying and Colouring Intimacy". The discussion focused on the relation between the human body and things, as well as the creation, development and display of feelings and intimacy through this relationship. Like the following days of the Summer School, Tuesday's sessions were divided in two parts; while the senior scholars presented their current research topics in the morning, the afternoon was reserved for related group discussions amongst scholars and students. With "Undressing Fashions: Intimate Bodies and Public Narratives in 21st Century Chinese Visual Culture", PAOLA ZAMPERINI (Amherst, Massachusetts) presented her research on underwear in contemporary Chinese Visual Culture. She argued that a close analysis of the ways in which underwear is worn and depicted in visual media generates knowledge about intimate issues, such as perception of the body, changing gender roles,

and economic and sexual preferences. Additionally, it proves helpful to reconstruct public narratives and expressions on these issues.

Thereafter, CHRISTIANE BROSIUS (Heidelberg), Professor of Visual and Media Anthropology, presented her talk on “Colouring Companionship in Urban India”. She discussed imagined and real space making through objects such as Valentine’s cards. These newly created spaces were then related to issues of class identity and consumerism. Christiane Brosius highlighted how intimate things and emotions, like greeting cards or the lingerie previously mentioned, are made public through gift-giving and consumption. On the one hand this can be seen as public indecency, illicit display of affection, associated with danger and restrictions; on the other hand, it creates private islands in the public sphere for middle class couples.

Using the examples of small feet and large hands in Chinese visual culture, BARBARA MITTLER (Heidelberg) showed how the visual implementation of beauty and intimacy is constantly reshaped and how narratives of the body are subordinate to prescribed modes of seeing. In her talk on “Seeing Matters: Forms, Materials & Colours of Love and Life in China”, she addressed the colour and shape of things and its changing significance according to political circumstances, highlighting the need for the “period eye”.

The sessions on Wednesday, August 1st, were entitled “Forming Material Worlds: Scale, Form and Substance”. KAJRI JAIN (Mississauga, Canada) began the day with a talk on the emergence of monumental statues of religious figures in India. In discussing “How size does matter”, the art historian related the increasing popularity of these monumental statues to the country’s neo-liberal changes, such as urban development, expansion of capitalism and the tourism industry. Her focal point was the meaning of size and its often negatively connoted moral/ethical and ideological associations with power and hegemonic consumer industries. In order to go beyond these assumptions on ‘the gigantic’ and ‘the monstrous’, Kajri Jain concentrated on connections and assemblages formed or engendered by the statues and their construction material.

SUMATHI RAMASWAMY (Durham) led the participants from the scale of religious statues to debates on the globe and its influence on the formation of an early modern subjectivity with regard to the South Asian continent. The historian’s paper “Global encounters, Spherical reflections” followed itineraries of the globe as a tangible instrument through three ‘biographical’ stories and

different media (painting, photography, film). Referring to Kenneth George’s argument on “companiability”, she particularly focused on the use of the globe for educational purposes in colonial and post-colonial India.

Before the afternoon group discussion, MONICA JUNEJA (Heidelberg), Professor of Global Art History, presented the example of the “Millionenzimmer” or “Spiegelzimmer” in the Schönbrunn palace in Vienna for her talk on “Cut, paste and reconfigure: bringing home mythical worlds”. She focused on the practice of decoupage in the Millionenzimmer, in which pieces from miniatures of South Asian albums were used. She argued that this practice allowed for a simultaneous creation and obliteration of materiality, destroying narratives while creating others.

In the evening, JAN BARDSLEY (Chapell Hill, North Carolina) gave the second keynote lecture, “From Kitsch to Cool: The Geisha Apprentice in Japanese Visual Culture”. The presentation addressed visions of girlhood in contemporary Japan and asked how traditions, in the form of the Maiko, become packaged as cute, consumable goods such as Maiko accessories, make-up products, postcards and candy.

On the fourth day, the participants dealt with matters related to “Collecting & Exhibiting Material: Assemblages, Performances, Museums”. In her presentation, KAVITA SINGH (New Delhi) brought the National Museums of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to attention. Starting with the question of how people have been collecting things, she argues that these three museums are expressions of a new national identity subsequent to independence and separation. Identity, she pointed out, is related to notions of heritage, religion, collective remembering and amnesia, as well as the reframing of a national past.

In the lecture entitled “Showcases: Isolation vs. Interrelation”, CHRISTOPH LIND concentrated on the use of showcases in the display of exhibits. The former Vice Director of Fine Arts and Cultural History and Head of the Department “Exhibition Management and Education” at the Reiss-Engelhorn Museums (Mannheim) reconstructed the dichotomy produced through this twofold usage of isolating and interrelating; on the one hand, used to ensure protection and security, showcases are perceived as barriers between the object and the visitor. Visibility and experience are reduced. On the other hand they can be seen as instrument to frame and/or set apart certain exhibits. The curator especially highlighted the importance of showcases as means to differentiate cer-

tain exhibits – which are presented in showcases – from objects used in daily life or other museum objects – and which are not.

In the afternoon workshops students and scholars discussed the framing of objects and exhibitions, museums as contact zones, their potential differencing role and visitor reception, and other topics induced by the two lectures in the morning.

The last, and fifth day was used for concluding statements and discussion. In the morning, participants prepared in groups statements and presentations on how the Summer School had impacted their perception of their own research materials and projects. One participant, for instance, felt that the Summer School enabled her to structure her own research topic: “The summer school helped to reassess the direction my PhD project needs to take: It allowed me to choose the objects/subjects I was really interested in, rather than the ones I had decided fitted better with the overall project”. Another student commented “the workshop at Heidelberg has been productive to think about methods and approaches towards the study of visual and performative material in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The rich ethnographies and inter-disciplinary engagements have borne several fruitful discussions, especially on the vexing issue of the politics of representation alongside the ethics of ‘following the object’ [...]”.

Especially the last comment shows that the previously set aims of the Summer School have been met. The participation of scholars from various disciplines fostered a transdisciplinary approach to matters of materiality and visuality. The Summer School pointed, for example, at different ways of approaching material culture, mediating between the dangers of anthropomorphism and the benefits of research on human-thing relations. It also granted a refined view on the transgressing mobility of objects and images and offered new methods and tools to address this topic. Presentations and discussions showed that research on materiality prompts a wide span of possible approaches, for example, via the colour, shape, and size of objects. Finally, the last section of the Summer School raised issues of visibility and created a direct connection between the representation of material culture in museums and the production of value in relation to power and agency. Further information on “Seeing Matter(s): Materiality and Visuality” is available at <http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/summerschool/> (18.03.2013). The next summer school of the Cluster

of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context” will be held in August 2013.

#### Conference Overview:

Summer School “Seeing Matter(s): Materiality and Visuality”

*Welcome and Introduction to the Transcultural Visual Learning Group, Cluster Project B4*

Christiane Brosius / Barbara Mittler / Sumathi Ramaswamy

*Introduction of B4 members and invited scholars*

*Poster presentations by the participants; 8-10 minutes per project*

*General Discussion:* “Why does materiality matter when it comes to interpreting visuality? Approaches, methodological problems, materials, expectations etc.”

Chairs: Melanie Trede, Paola Zamperini

*Public Keynote 1*

Kenneth George: “Companionable Objects, Companionable Conscience”

*Delicate Materials: Embodying and Colouring Intimacy*

Paola Zamperini: “Undressing Fashions: Intimate Bodies and Public Narratives in 21st Century Chinese Visual Culture”

Christiane Brosius: “Colouring Companionship in Urban India”

Barbara Mittler “Materials of Love and Life in China”

Laila Abu-Er-Rub: “Reflections on Presentations and Introduction to Discussion”

Group Work/Readings; “On Colour and Intimacy” (2 Groups led by Paola Zamperini and Christiane Brosius; Barbara Mittler and Laila Abu-Er-Rub)

*Forming Material Worlds: Scale, Form and Substance*

Kajri Jain: “How size does matter”

Sumathi Ramaswamy: “Global encounters, Spherical reflections”

Monica Juneja: “Cut, paste and reconfigure: bringing home mythical worlds”

*Reflections on Presentations and Introduction to Discussion (Jan Bardsley)*

Group Work/Readings: “On Scale, Form & Substance” (2 Groups led by Sumathi Ramaswamy and Kajri Jain; Monica Juneja)

*Public Keynote 2*

Jan Bardsley: “From Kitsch to Cool: The Geisha Apprentice in Japanese Visual Culture”

*Collecting & Exhibiting Material: Assemblages, Performances, Museums*

Kavita Singh: “National Museums of South Asia”

Christoph Lind: “Showcases: Isolation? Contextualisation?”

Cathrine Bublatzky: Reflections on Presentations and Introduction to Discussion

*Group Work/Readings*

“On Collecting and framing” (2 Groups led by Melanie Trede and Cathrine Bublatzky; Kavita Singh)

*Seeing Matter(s)*

Feedback Round: Reflect on your own work and prepare a short presentation: What have I learned, gained for my own work, what do I take home, how do I visualize my research matter?

Student Presentations & Final Discussion: Prepare a short statement on how your own Ways of Seeing have changed and if you may be changing your own research along the lines introduced by the Summer School

*Farewell & Certificate for Summer School participants*

*Internal session on teaching module (for all members of Cluster-project B4)*

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

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