The Veiled Interests of Multiculturalism:
An address to the Nexus Multicultural Arts Centre AGM, 12 May 2011

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Abstract

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Firstly, I would like to thank Norris Ioannou for inviting me here today to address the AGM. It is a great honour to address such an assembly, one which has dedicated itself to the noble pursuit of this thing called ‘Multicultural Arts’ — more specifically, according to the website, “to produce and showcase multicultural arts for audiences” and “to connect diverse communities and bring them into the mainstream”. I hope today to probe this mission a little further, to open up new space for what multicultural arts might mean for the ‘mainstream’.

I must confess at the start to being somewhat awkwardly situated in the language of multiculturalism. Perhaps the easiest way to situate myself is to say I am a Filipino migrant to Australia, having arrived when I was just one. I am told I spoke only one non-English word at the time – ahas meaning ‘snake’ (I’ll leave the Freudian interpretations to you). In any case, it

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was strange while growing up being categorised as a NESB, non-English speaking background, since Philippines was an English speaking country at the time. At other times, I was dubbed ‘ethnic’, which presumes that British, Australian or Irish were not ethnicities. But times have changed, I am told for the better. Now apparently I’m CALD, culturally and linguistically diverse, which still makes little sense to me or at least makes no real advances from NESB. Who isn’t culturally and linguistically diverse? This is all to say that I hope you can understand that for me the language of multiculturalism seems a rather circuitous way of avoiding having to name ‘coloured people’ when often that is what is meant.

Of course this isn’t surprising when one considers the history of Australian immigration policies, with which I will not bore you. Suffice to say that multiculturalism has tended to be an ambivalent beast: on the one hand, multiculturalism has been (although it is less so today) a policy of equity and access, that is access to education, employment, etc. On the other hand, multiculturalism is a policy for managing coloured populations so that they are always already other than the mainstream. Multiculturalism surfaces in such a way that the mainstream (presumed to be white) can continuously invite the coloured migrant ‘into the home’, without having to concede that the home is already shared by them.

Let me provide a recent example. In my first week in Adelaide, a taxi driver asked me ‘where I was from?’ When I innocently answered ‘Sydney’ he suddenly became flustered and angry and warned me ‘Australians don’t like smart arses’. Growing up in Australia, being educated in Australia, representing Australia in international competitions, teaching Australian history and literature, volunteering with Australian charity organisations, working for Australian government departments – apparently none of this counted towards my recognition as an Australian. First and foremost my colour indicated that I was ‘from somewhere else’. His biggest complaint was that I didn’t know my place. Had I simply answered ‘Philippines’ he would have been fine. It was the fact that I had assumed too much, that is ‘too much belonging’, that I had assumed this to be my home, which made him upset. So here’s the first problem: the problem of exclusion, of never fully being ‘at home’ in Australia, of always coming ‘from elsewhere’.
On the other hand, multiculturalism often introduces a burden of representation laden with good intentions, but which when asserted reinforces one’s non-belonging to the nation. When some people find out I don’t speak Tagalog (the Filipino national language) I often hear ‘that’s a shame’. During one argument a woman was telling me ‘you should try and keep your culture alive’ (as if somehow ‘my culture’, which is presumed to be not ‘Australian culture’, was dying). In such cases I am asked to be the bearer of ‘another culture’, to help add to the cultural diversity of Australia. And of course it is my shame for not continuing the language, not the shame of Australia’s monolinguistic policy, not the shame of educational systems that place value on learning European languages but not Asian languages, etc. The boring truth that I am merely a product of Australian assimilationism is an offence to the cosmopolitan who feels that I have ‘let myself go’, as if my true ethnic self were displaced from the person they see before them. So this is the second problem: the problem of being the bearer of cultural diversity, of being forced to wear the mark of exile in order for cosmopolitans to feel, well, more cosmopolitan about themselves.

It’s this double-bind that provides the framework for understanding and interpreting ‘multicultural art’ in Australia. According to the Australia Council’s ‘Arts in a multicultural Australia policy’, we have moved away from a belief in ‘ethnic art’ as synonymous with ‘folk art’ and ‘cultural traditions’. We have moved away from contrasting tradition with innovation. It’s a sobering point to realise the difficulty of getting this policy through. Fazal Rizvi recounts how some Council members initially rejected the relevance of multiculturalism to the arts, while others used the normative criteria of ‘excellence’, ‘innovation’ and ‘contemporary’ to dismiss wholesale the artistic productions of non-European cultures as simply ‘traditional arts and craft’. So I wish to pay due recognition that this is a policy derived in struggle and one I support at that level.

Yet this shift in perspective in policy is not necessarily in practice. The two problems outlined above – the first of never becoming mainstream no matter how much you try and the second of the burden of representation – continue to haunt the shaping of what is termed here as
‘multicultural art’. Multicultural art, diasporic art, transnational art have been offered as other terms, but whatever the heading, what these arts tend to focus on are questions of migration, of exile, of belonging. They are, far from becoming mainstream, always about re-iterating their non-belongingness. Of course this paints the contemporary art scene in broad brushstrokes, but I’m sure for many of you know of what I speak. Does it not seem questionable why such art should be so loved by cosmopolitans? Does it not seem suspect that art criticism of non-white Australian artists should constantly harp on about these themes? Can multicultural art have anything else to say, can it represent anything other than its own exile?

While viewing the website I was struck by the photo by Nasim Nasr, ‘Untitled (Rebirth) 2010’, which will be showing at the Nexus Gallery later this month in an exhibition titled Rebirth as part of the Human Rights Arts and Film Festival.

It’s a beautiful and striking image. A Muslim woman wearing a full black burqa stands against a white background, holding a plastic bag of water in which swims a goldfish. The orange-gold of the tiny fish contrasts starkly against the darkness of the burqa, which becomes a sort of black canvas for the aqueous life form. If the juxtaposition between the human and the non-human in the image foregrounds the fragile life of the fish, teetering on the edge of her palm, it does so in such a way that the goldfish becomes a symbol of the vulnerability of Muslim women around the world. This is after all an image floating under the sign of ‘human rights’.

And yet, the image is striking precisely because of the contemporary Islamophobia that fills the burqa with so much extraneous meaning: signs of women’s oppression, symptoms of Islamic fundamentalism. One cannot enter the field of interpretation naively. We must ask ourselves why here and why now? What makes this image speak to us at this moment, this political juncture? To interpret the image is already to be caught up in the webs of meaning that have already been spun around Islam and Muslims in the post-9/11 context. It is to be caught in the representation of Islam and Muslim men as sexist and homophobic, it is to be caught in the heated burqa debates across the West, it is to be caught in the fears of ‘Muslim gang rapists’ and ‘on-street grooming’. In short, it is to be caught in the claims that Muslims are antithetical
to modernity. So in the end, this returns us again to the problems of multiculturalism, to the familiar binary of ethnic tradition versus Western modernity, between other and mainstream.

But what makes Nasr’s image so compelling is that it is difficult to ascertain a clear moral or political claim. Does Nasr celebrate the burqa or critique it? The biography on her website mentions “various forms of oppressive coverings” as an ongoing theme of her work, suggesting her distaste for the burqa. And yet the image is not entirely what it at first seems. We presume this to be an image of a Muslim woman and yet one cannot be entirely sure. How do you know it’s a woman? How do you even know it’s a burqa?

There’s an uncanny moment when one realises that the person underneath the burqa is not facing the audience. It is only through the positioning of the fingers and the shape of the high heel boots that we realise we are in fact looking at someone’s back. This is perhaps what is most frightening to the Australian who finds the burqa so culturally challenging. One cannot know fully what goes on underneath: the opacity of the burqa is underscored by the transparency of the plastic bag that reveals the fish. We should be reminded that the goldfish is not a food source, but an ornament. It is a fish on display adorning the tanks of suburban homes. From this perspective, the goldfish might be seen as a warning against the dangers of being on display for the pleasure and entertainment of others, of becoming ornamental.

This ambiguity can serve us well in thinking differently about multicultural arts and its relations to the mainstream. Multicultural arts should also be wary of this danger, the danger of becoming ornamental, of becoming merely the creature of display for the cosmopolitan who wants easy access to exotic cultures or to wallow in the sublime agony of migrants’ exile. At the same time, we should be careful not to keep multicultural arts in its place. We should listen for it in sounds we can barely discern, to be willing to find it already in our homes and to be prepared at times for it to turn its backs on us.