

Homi Bhabha and Mitra Tabrizian in conversation

chaired and edited by Rosie Thomas

Homi: Mitra, I see your work as a critique of consumerism and the ethics of commerce and industrial practice. It's also a critique of the functionalism of that world. Yet your art practice seems to me to be very formalist itself and very high modernist. I find the high formalism of the work attractive, it's very staged, with tremendous attention to mise-en-scene. But I'm interested in how this, as a mode, provides you with the critical tools that you want to use to critique the substance of late global capitalism.

Mitra: I'm not sure how you're using the term 'high formalism'. Historically there are distinctions between Western formalism, which promotes form for form's sake, and Russian formalism, which aims to explore the relation between form and content and had some critical agenda. What do you mean by high formalism or high modernism?

H: I mean that there is a great emphasis on composition, on structure, on symbolic representation. Look at the symmetry, the colour tone shifts, the two-third/one third composition. *The Man Falling*, which I like very much, seems to talk about the grid and the box, the minimalist structures of high modernism. You also use parody, so that your work signifies in a double way: taking on a style and at the same time being deeply embedded within that style. The work succeeds at such a concerted and concretized level that you begin to see the tropes and conceptual themes of high modernism: a certain formalism, the notion of grids, symmetry, imagistic sequence, metaphoric transcendence, the internal reference to further and further layers of interpretation. While these works may be flattened at one level, emphasizing surface, this is only because they aggressively ask you to keep on interpreting their depths. What I mean is that many of these very concrete characteristics of high modernist representation and the habits of high modernist interpretation are evoked in your work but they are deployed to address very contemporary issues about consumerist, industrial late capitalism. Am I right?

M: In *Beyond the Limits*, the series you're referring to, the pictures are deliberately artificial, cold and flat. I've sometimes been criticized for this: some say the photos are too cold and thus do not evoke emotion. Artificiality is not very desirable in the art world at the moment: the more we move towards the artificial world, the more we emphasize 'reality'. Reality is at its height! So my intention was to refer to the lush and colourful, but cold and two-dimensional, corporate world that we are operating in, which is about appearances and surfaces.

H: So, what does this mean? I want to understand what you are saying about appearances and surfaces. It could be argued that the hard, cold, industrial-capitalist environment has changed its climate with the conversion to 'soft' virtual technologies in some major sectors. And these technologies are not two-dimensional. In fact, they try to morph and mould and mimic human personhood and attempt to become part of our interiorized lives, as psychologically adept as they are politically effective. Surveillance and power as enacted through the new technologies are often 'incorporative': they not only want to become part of your body and your mind and drive your desires 'as if' from within – what Foucault called "subjectification" - but they also want to suggest that the external world has a kind of imagistic plasticity, and is itself a kind of virtual reality that can be manipulated 'as if' on a screen.

M: Surely the whole point of the virtual is that it is two-dimensional, but creates an illusion of three-dimensionality. But to go back to appearances and surfaces, one example, metaphorically is speaking, is networking or public relations which is now a major part of success. In one of the photos from *Beyond the Limits* you see a crowd networking in a gallery, what you don't see is art! It's an ironical commentary on the art world and how it operates. What is important is how you sell an idea rather than the idea itself.

H: Yes, that's true, but that's not the way I would read the attention to flatness or coldness in these pictures. If you talk about surface or appearance, then the other side of surface is some kind of depth, and the other side of appearance is some kind of reality.

But I don't associate that kind of epistemology - of appearance vs. truth or the simulacrum vs. reality - with you. Of course, I understand what you're saying. There is an enormous emphasis now on *appearance as status*. There's a fetishization of personality in the art world, just as there is amongst chefs in the restaurant world. That's why Damien Hirst and Marco Pierre White could start a restaurant together and establish an 'art world' of restaurants. I understand that as late romantic cultism: it's about personality creation or networking, as you said.

M: I borrow the words 'surface' and 'appearance' from Baudrillard's notion of simulation – his idea that we live in a simulated culture where increasingly the dialectic signifier/signified is lost and with it there is a loss of meaning. All we are left with is commodity culture which is what most of the work in this book is about. So perhaps we should concentrate on the culture of style. Surely there is a distinction between pastiche and parody? There are works that are flirting with ideas, no matter what codes they use – successfully or unsuccessfully, and there are works that are pastiche – lack ideas.

H: But how do you make the distinction? You can say that this is a thoughtful piece - or this is not a thoughtful piece - of work. And then I would completely agree with you. But what is a work that flirts with ideas, or a work that lacks ideas? Surely that is a charge made against many conceptual, cutting-edge artists who worked 'against representationalism'. Isn't it strange how often the oblique and experimental approach to aesthetic thinking is seen as a 'flirtation' with ideas, an insubstantial encounter with thought?

M: Let's take the notion of shock for instance, which is very popular in contemporary art. There is a trend which says: "let's shock the audience"...

H: But Duchamp also said 'let's shock' and so did Bertolt Brecht. And Warhol said 'let's shock'...but surely shock is also a way of displacing norms and conventions, of initiating emergent debates about form and value, visibility and inscription?

M: But they had an agenda to shock, while now the tendency is towards shock for shock's sake; style for style's sake. The purpose of shocking becomes redundant.

H: But I am still surprised that you want to make this distinction between some kind of substantive idea and its appearance. I would have suspected that your interest in surface and flatness is itself a kind of theoretical *trompe l'oeil*, bearing an elliptical and elisional relation to the 'signified.' If you are saying that these days a lot that is substandard or uninteresting art passes for significant work because of the power of the art-market system so long as it encodes or uses the right gestures of style, then it's a problem of bad art having fallen on good times. But the more sustained thesis of the language you're using, where things are appearances rather than substantial ideas... I don't get that. And I don't understand why *you* would want to go there, because that whole aesthetic, and that epistemological approach to representation would, in a funny way, contradict precisely what you want to achieve, which is surface, flatness, a certain kind of lighting and even a certain kind of "frozen shock" in the work. Presumably in your own work you are using those gestures of contemporary art that you critique in order to parody them and to open up other understandings of surface. That I understand. But I think we have to push beyond the distinction of idea versus appearance - here are works of ideas and there are works only of appearance - because some of the great art of our times plays with the fact that to look for the idea, the real idea, might actually evade the whole problem of representation and the play of signification.

M: I'm aware of the debates about representation, signification, 'depth' and so on. Keeping these debates in mind, I still think we are moving towards a 'culture of style': where critical ideas have become redundant. What seems to be in demand is entertainment (of some sort) without any analytical input.

H: Some people said about your own early works, *The Blues*, "What has this got to do with racism? This is all style for style's sake. This is all Lacan and 'the gaze'. All these people dressed in this rather postured way, and these shocking colour-tones and colour-values that come through: this is all style. What about the real politics of racism?" I

don't want *us* to fall into that trap. What you describe as "style for style's sake" is a superficial pushing of certain kinds of eye-catching gestures: somebody produces a work that is very popular and other people produce lesser versions of that work hoping that the market will have a place for all these works. I'm sure that happens. But if you put the question in such a general way, I don't know how to answer it because so much that I have valued myself has been dismissed as trendy, as "style for style's sake", or "jargon for jargon's sake". Many people genuinely thought that Lacan and Derrida represented nothing more than an obscurantist *style* of thought and writing. Mallarme was dismissed at one time by people who thought his work was art for art's sake...or style for style's sake. This has often been the attack mounted by the empiricist or idealist tradition against the phenomenological style of thought.

M: My understanding of Baudrillard's concept of simulation is not that he is looking for some reality or real idea out there or is nostalgic about the reality that once has been and is now lost. He is arguing that we are in the process of losing our critical capacity, that all we are left with is simulation. I used the idea of public relations as a metaphor for how we think: everything is reduced to commodity and marketability. We are more interested in how things are presented and sold than in any critical understanding. I overheard a woman at a party talking enthusiastically about a conference on 'networking' that she attended recently and how useful it was. So networking seems to be the key to success nowadays!

In the series *Beyond the Limits* I wanted to emphasize the notion of the surface, of flatness. But in each narrative something has gone 'wrong'. These 'mishappenings' can be read as an allegory, a reference to Baudrillard's idea that we are moving towards a world in which the basic axiom of each system is pushed to the point that produces the opposite effects from those intended. Now you may disagree with Baudrillard's thesis of simulation and over-saturation, a society in which he claims the question of meaning has become superfluous. For me his analysis of contemporary culture is extremely significant in understanding the new conditions that we are facing. But let's forget about the terms 'surfaces' and 'appearances', regrettably used, and let's go back to the culture

of style and the question of representation, which I think is in crisis, i.e. we no longer know how to think of alternatives.

H: Advertising is, of course, one of the major art forms of the contemporary consumerist, late-modern, world in which we live. Clearly many of your art works make reference to contemporary traditions of advertising which are themselves very knowing about semiotics, about the gaze, about the elusive object of visual capture. They are very crafty about their own artifice. So, what do you adopt from that commercial art practice, and what do you critique of it? What is your relation to it?

M: Advertising has become much more complex as we know. Earlier, advertising was characterized by its high quality, lush colours and so on, but now advertisers use anything at their disposal to serve their purposes. I was once commissioned to do an advertising campaign but then ‘de-commissioned’ on the basis that the images were too disturbing. I was, in a way, pleased with this outcome. I thought they are still concerned with the relation between form and content which means the image has to be ‘safe’ in some respect. So in relation to advertising, ideally I would like the work to ‘quote’ the culture of commodity but simultaneously to create uneasiness and critical detachment, which is difficult to achieve.

H: When you talk of the ‘safe’ image, do you mean something like flirting with disruptive conceptual frames and interruptive, interventionist genre styles but always pulling them back, framing them in a certain way, glossing them in a certain way, so that they come to be naturalized – made safe? Is that right? –What is ‘safe’ and what is ‘disturbing’?

M: A man blowing his brains out is ‘safe’ in a static form. So, for me, the disturbing thing about this photograph (from the series *Beyond the Limits*) is not the man blowing his brains out but the couple’s reaction: the man is smiling, apparently indifferent to his own death, and the woman is dropping the baby without expressing any emotion. That to me is more disturbing than the action itself. I’m not saying that these images might not

fit within some advertising campaign. They could very well be appropriated, you never know. I think parody is becoming almost impossible. That's why the context in which you present these images is very important.

H: Now forget why *they* might have thought that this was disturbing, or not safe, let's put that aside. The disturbance in this picture, as you said, cannot possibly be the fact that this guy is blowing out his brains with a smile on his face. If you look at it from a distance – at least in this image that I have in front of me – the little trickle of blood almost looks like a wisp of hair, it's hardly there. But equally, the danger of the image surely cannot be that this expressionless woman is dropping her child as some kind of reactive accident, partly because, in a week when the media is full of stories about two kids having been raped and killed, this doesn't seem very harmful, and secondly, now we know so much about trick photography, animation, simulation, computer generated images, almost anything seems to be representable. We know you could have brought this child from another image and put it on here. So, the danger of this cannot be its mimetic content: neither the blowing up of the brain, nor the zombie-like woman dropping this otherwise seemingly quite content child. So what is the "disturbance" of this image?

M: It's obvious this image is constructed, but that's not the point. The image doesn't have to show the 'real scene' in order to have some validity, to make a statement, or be disturbing. Two kids being raped and killed is a horrific act, but what is more disturbing is that we no longer care! That we are bombarded with violence, that we have become immune to it. This image is a reference to Takeshi Kitano, the Japanese filmmaker, whose work interests me a lot. Takeshi pushes the notion of violence beyond its limits. His characters, gangsters or detectives, often don't care if they kill or are killed. What Takeshi clearly indicates is people's indifference to violence, which means they are capable of any act. And I do think that we're living in an age where we've become increasingly indifferent to what's happening to us. So it is our 'indifference' that I find disturbing.

H: In what respect are we indifferent to what's happening to us?

M: Again, as Baudrillard argues, we live in this over-saturated society where we can no longer be selective. What we have is over-production rather than production, i.e. an escalation of meaning, information, consumer goods etc – and of violence for that matter. We absorb without thinking, without digesting. What I mean by 'indifference' is to be unselective on the one hand, and to lose any critical evaluation or strategies of resistance on the other: conformity.

H: But, arguably, we live in a time of great global concern and philanthropy, with NGOs, international criminal courts, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions all over the world. Probably because of technological communication technologies, we have never lived in a time when we were *more* concerned, or – let me modify that – at least in a position to be more concerned, about each other: we have the great anti-globalization demonstrations, even global capitalists like Ted Turner are providing huge donations to the UN, the Gates foundation gives billions to eradicate blindness in India, even this Bush government is thinking of increasing many-fold its grants to eradicate AIDS in Africa, and so on. Just on the basis of these scenarios, if this whole world has blossomed, how can you say we are living in an indifferent world? I certainly think that one has always to be vigilant, even cynical, against grand philanthropic gestures, but they have to be taken on board. I cannot accept your blanket charge of indifference, or your generalized description of the contemporary world. Who is the "we" that operates in the statements you have made? With due respect to Baudrillard, I find these generalizations too bland and self-satisfied. Are you or I or millions of other thoughtful, aspirational people really "absorbing without thinking, without digesting"?

M: I see those attempts often as gestures with no real impact. Bush, Gates and others may be happy to 'support' causes or 'solve' problems as long as their own systems of power remain intact. Baudrillard's point is that these institutions have become so powerful now and control everything in such way that there is no longer any means of reversing these systems, no longer any subversive strategies to challenge them. The only

solution is the strategy of blocking, of inertia, a response which is, in effect, a form of neutralization. “We cannot call that negative”, he says. So Baudrillard’s rather esoteric reading of people’s ‘indifference’ considers it a form of resistance! I don’t agree with that, but I do think his analysis of indifference - people’s general resignation - is extremely interesting.

H: I’m not sure I buy this generalizing idea that we live in a world of indifference. Nor do I necessarily buy the Baudrillardian idea that we are now bombarded as never before. I am always skeptical of these concepts of the present being exemplary of the thesis that the critic wants – that this is *the* most global age; this is *the* age of the greatest bombardment of images. This is what Habermas calls “the exaltation of the present.” He says this is about placing a new value on the transitory, the elusive, the ephemeral, perhaps even the simulacrum. But the very celebration of dynamism discloses a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present. Theoretically, you want to be able to say, “this is the moment of flows and transitions” but it has to become the moment of the most *exemplary* demonstration of these things. I think that we certainly live in times of great difficulties and disenchantments but I just feel uncomfortable with arguments that make the present moment archly representative of some grand tendency of the times. But I know you don’t.

M: No, I don’t! You only need to access the internet to ‘realise’ the Baudrillardian idea of bombardment: information, images, consumer goods stream out at us. You have to work to detect the useful amongst so much that is useless. While you don’t necessarily have to buy all of Baudrillard’s analysis of contemporary culture, to insist that we are not facing a culture of greater excess and over-production than ever before is, in my view, an act of disavowal!

H: That takes us into another debate. Let’s turn back to the work. You once said that you’re referring to the fact that people within the major institutions that you are yourself involved in - the worlds of art, education and the media - are nowadays so insecure.

M: This is partly because all these institutions including education are now so market-oriented. And that is much more exaggerated now than in the past.

H: You have put your finger on something there. Post the Cold War and the Soviet Union, the neo-liberal market has become the dominant idea. And marketability has become the dominant idea of economic and social success and survival. And it is surprising how the market has come to be embraced. Why? After the Berlin Wall came down, one of the first things that happened was that people set up small stalls to buy and sell...Why? Is it the failure of state socialism that makes people want to enter the market? Is it the fact that collectivist philosophies failed to articulate their own concepts of non-individualistic freedom? Was it the formation of corrupt and ruthless elites in those societies where “the will of the people” was supposed to be pre-eminent? It is one of the quandaries of our times that people still believe, despite the mediatic and technological culture in which we live, that there is something about *individuated* agency that keeps alive the spirit of freedom, although their material lives may convince them otherwise. In those societies where, ideologically and economically, the market was most criticized - those planned economies, communist nations, socialist nations or even India – it was the people who most wanted to destroy these non-market planned economies. So we’ve also got to talk about the failures of those societies which tried to provide an alternative to the market. Think about the huge corruption, the huge bureaucracy, the huge, huge inequalities created in societies which were so-called socialist or communist. We can spend our time deploring how horrible it is now that everything is the market. But it also happened because the other systems failed, and fouled up their promise. This is not by any means an exoneration of the market, only a caution against coming full circle...

M: I agree. But let’s return to the question of indifference. In the art world, for instance, despite the fantasy about artists’ freedom and rebelliousness, you have to fulfill certain conditions in order to succeed. You have to be marketable and young to be given a chance - unless you’re already established. A friend of mine, a talented artist, was recently told by her gallery that her work would not be presented in the art fair because

she was over thirty-five, despite the fact she is fairly established. So there is a new form of conformity and collusion - and no one questions it.

H But *you're* not indifferent to what's happening to you. Look at you: you're obsessed in a very proper way with this question, your whole work is about that. I don't think most people are indifferent to what's happening to them, I think people are very clear that their choices are limited.

M: That could be one interpretation, the other is that people are now dispensable and thus in a perpetual state of anxiety about losing their jobs or status, in the art market, for instance. And this is the market's new ideology: anyone is replaceable at any time regardless of skills or experience. No one feels valued! And in a way the spirit of resistance is gone. Ten-fifteen years ago, if you wanted to organize some form of oppositional strategies in your workplace, there would have been the possibility of support or interest. Now there is none.

H: But, Mitra, that is not because people have changed but because the trade union movement has been crushed. This has taken away the respect and space given to resistance. Laws, organizations and institutions have changed. Why won't you look at the material basis of this? It's not a question of individual indifference, it's a question of not being able to materially act because the political parameters have been re-drawn in the most restrictive and regulative ways. You could protest when you knew you were protected by legislation. That would make your protest productive, because between the institution and you, there would be laws, agreements and conventions through which you could negotiate and build an empowering strategy. If you think you are going to be thrown out tomorrow and the machine will just continue working, the very nature of protest changes. Since Thatcherism and New Labour the notion of welfarist entitlement has been eroded. Talking about it as indifference, which people just go along with, may well describe the symptoms of this situation but it is a very individualistic way of looking at the problem. I think it is more a question of being defeated.

M: Not having the union's support to protect our jobs obviously affects our decisions about actions, but there is also the individual's 'attitude': the way we have all resigned ourselves to the situation. We all want to, or have to, play 'safe', which is why there's no hope of opposition. Why we adopt such an attitude is a very complex issue and I don't think it's just because we've lost the unions. In a curious way it has become a new mode of thinking.

H: There seem to be three questions here. One is about how we might want to rethink resistance. Not all kinds of resistance are the same. Conceptually, my work has always tried to think about resistance in a less orthodox way, to find agency when and where it was deemed to be weak or obscure or ineffective. My continuing interest in psychoanalysis has been to try and redefine agency. That's why people have both attacked and attached themselves to my work. Forms of agency and resistance don't remain the same and we have to shift our own paradigms to see the new forms in which they emerge. For instance, now a number of people in the United States say that black music culture, although highly commodified, has within it traditions of resistance. So the question of resistance changes.

The second issue is about what the *unit* of social or political transformation is. Is it the individual? Is it the group? Is it the interaction between the two? Is it the way in which sometimes you have a group and then at other times you have a political decision or act which demands that the group is individuated, without becoming part of the ideology of individualism? Obviously, to many people this would not make sense – they'd say: "there are individuals and groups, you idiot, what else is there? There is no third kind of substance." But I find it politically interesting to ask what the material 'unit' of agency may be. I am not sure that agency has to be necessarily attached to the integrity, or the integrality, of individuals or groups: maybe agency also emerges in the effects and affects of certain actions and practices of which a person or a collective may be the author but not the agent.

In your work, you also seem to raise the question of the subject of the political process. Who, or what, is the subject of this visual representation of this social process? Very often, you have a large group of people, where there's a kind of anomie, everybody is almost scripted, for example the crowd in the gallery – or the young people in the pink office – or even in the *Silent Majority* where you see people in the street. At other times, you focus on triptychs, or duals, like in the photograph of the couple picnicking – or in *The Blues* series, the photo of 'Lost Frontier' – or 'Persecution'. The couple has also been an important structure for you to think about social processes, where the couple is neither an individual nor is it a group.

One of the things that interests me very much at the moment is that, for Fanon and Memmi, the subject is neither the individual nor the group but a particular kind of tension called the couple: colonizer-colonized. Conceptually, it's a relational tension that becomes the dynamic of the discourse of de-colonization. Now, when you're representing this, you call one *the colonizer*, one *the colonized*; you call one *he*, one *she*; you call one *Algerian*, you call the other *French*; you call one "*Martinican*", one "*Tunisian*," one "*Jew*"...or whatever as polar positions. You name these as antagonists, but the couple, as the agential unit of social analysis in a situation of conflict and vile inequality, is much more a demonstration of a certain dynamic or movement articulating goals and purposes. The couple becomes a way of imagining some potential formation or de-formation of social change, rather than the group or individual. Memmi uses a wonderful phrase in a novel he wrote that goes something like: "I tried to think about the problems of colonization by talking about the couple until I realized that the whole world is in the couple". I think the couple is a very interesting way of not falling into the most common approaches of Anglo-American sociology and philosophy: either you look from an individual point of view, or you look from a group point of view. The couple nicely unsettles the boundaries of both those categories by suggesting that 'agency' is what occurs in-between subjects (individual or group) as a kind of outcome or movement or maneuver that attempts a transformation of material, historical or psychic circumstances.

My third issue is that, when we talk about indifference or complacency, we mustn't underestimate the whole notion of survival. It doesn't mean that I'm less critical, but I'm beginning to be much more attentive to what it takes to survive—survival is also a strategy of resistance, even if it is less spectacular in its self-presentation.

M: But at what price...

H: ... At the price of your art-work! You seem very concerned with what it takes to survive or subvert the contemporary world picture. We have given very little attention to survival in our discussions of power relations. We know about victimage, subalterneity, oppressors and hegemons, but this elusive category of 'survival' is one of the most politically acute, and ethically *and aesthetically important*, moments. The notion of resistance as survival is a very important issue, which also relates to your work, *Lost Time*, the series about ageism. Ageism is not only a prejudice against older people; it is also, amongst older people, about learning to live without the things that allowed them to fill their time. Learning to live without work. Learning to live with ill health. So, it is learning to live with mortality. It's all about having to survive. And this is one of the most difficult things to deal with. Survival is not 'sublateable' or surmountable. It reminds us of hard, unforgettable facts like the persistence of poverty and illiteracy in many of the world's wealthiest countries at levels that have barely shifted in decades, despite the rhetorics of global development, technological booms, new financial markets, etc. Those who are the victims of oppression and injustice also bear the burden of survival, of making their lives *work*, in the harshest conditions. We should learn from their *present and persistent experience*, their workaday witness, even when we project them as subversives or subalterns who carry the burden of historical transformation and political exemplarity, the burden of our hopes.

August 2003