

Curating, pedagogy: some thoughts in preparation for our research in Santiniketan

Andrea Phillips, January 2014.

The elite philanthropic model that Tagore followed slavishly until the end of his life in order to sustain Santiniketan still haunts the arts globally; it is the economic and aesthetic basis of contemporary art and its institutions; it dictates how things get arranged, how things get seen (Ranciere's 'distribution of the sensible'). This economy/ecology produces the very elitisms that it proposes to eradicate. What alternative economies might be generated if we think of curating at different personal, spatial and temporal scales – different arrangements of bodies and objects in space and time? If we think curating and pedagogy together as generative ongoing processes that might produce equality of cultural and political access rather than access through meritocracy and privilege?

Firstly we need to recognize that any approach to curating is currently a confrontation with a territorial process through which an increasing amount of people are funneled and an increasing amount of people are disregarded. Whilst this is a general observation it is interesting to note how exaggerated this process becomes in curatorial projects that have sought to 'be about' education. Recent and ongoing discussions about and engagements with schooling and pedagogy by curators in galleries and museums in Europe and North America have variously produced critiques of current Anglo-Saxon education (usually focused on Higher Education) and attempted to set up alternatives. These experiments, often influenced by the writings of Freire, Gramsci and Guattari, often highly informed, are nevertheless limited both practically and conceptually by the spatio-temporal conditions belonging to their infrastructure, in which the psycho-institutional requisite to produce a novel event or an exhibition is embedded. And, perhaps more seriously, their short-term and thematically presented rejection of ongoing education structures – those unwieldy but increasingly precarious structures of free school provision – divides us from the ongoing task of supporting, maintaining and fighting for the improvement of the very same.

Gayatri Spivak, in her notes on Tagore, quotes from a poem that illustrates the front of the first Pratiche Education Report (2002).¹ 'Let those who'll walk together recognize each other' says Tagore in the context of his development of an ever-circuitous search for funding for Santiniketan (the poem is from 1932). The report, about the development of universal primary education in India, reveals to Spivak the 'class apartheid' of education.² I would say that the class apartheid of education in India, about which I know very little, is of course fundamentally tied to the continuous class apartheid of education in the UK, about which I know a lot (sending my children to state schools in poor inner city boroughs of London). How does this relate to curating? In the sense that not only does curating exist upon a system of pedagogic privilege but that so often it hurts people in its process of gatekeeping. Can we think curating outside the forms of power that it produces and is produced by? How might a pedagogy of curating remove itself from the production of power? Can I imagine a curating that does not produce exclusions, hierarchies, distinctions (however benevolently articulated)?

This for me is the challenge of Santiniketan to Western curating, as I understand it through reading Tagore's descriptions of it. This is what I would like to propose as one question that might animate our research. In a sense, I think I am asking, what are we prepared to lose, to give up?³

1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), p.318.

2 *Ibid.*, p.328.

3 This question is influenced by some old and new experiences: being trained in Theatre at Dartington College of Arts in the late 80s; running an MFA in Curating at Goldsmiths between 2003 and 2008; helping to run free music school for children in Hackney in the early 2000s; curating the public programme of the Istanbul Biennial in 2013; studying the art market in detail with my colleague Suhail Malik; developing a project called *How To Work Together with The Showroom, Chisenhale and Studio Voltaire* galleries in London (and many other things – trying to write about this in various ways over the past ten years).