

In conversation with Johan Pijnappel

Interview by Naiza H Khan

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Johan Pijnappel studied Art History, Philosophy, Museology and Classical Archaeology at the Leiden University. In the late eighties he participated in the artists initiative 'Art meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy'. In the nineties he was co-curator of the World Wide Video Festival in Amsterdam. In the last ten years he has concentrated on the social engagement within Asian video art and the subject of cultural translation.

His latest curatorial projects have been 'Indian Video Art-History in Motion, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 'CC: Crossing Currents-Video Art and Cultural Identity' and 'The 3rd Seoul International Media Art Biennial'.

Naiza: Johan I would like you to briefly tell us a little bit about your background. I know that you've been involved in video art and a number of influential Biennales and important movements as well, so what are the things that have been important to you in the last decade?

Johan: Indeed in the past I was involved with Fluxus projects such as 'Art meets Science and Spirituality in a changing Economy'. This artists' initiative tried to give an alternative direction to the world of Biennials that were at that time, at least to us, already considered as a road down hill. The last ten years I have spent in Asia, particularly in India focusing on video/new media art, the social engagement and the role of cultural translation in our globalising world. It felt that this move to Asia was more important for me than staying in the West. As an art historian to some extent you are in the same boat as the artist, and that boat is about exploring and creating meaning wherever you think it is possible. Since the eighties the majority of the exhibition machines in the West were run like a marketing mechanism - by numbers and results that had nothing to do with meaning. However there were signs outside the Western art world that had the promise of change. I was curious about the artists from Asian countries living in a time of frantic change regarding the direction their minds would take.

Should it always go by the capitalist model or would an artist try to find routes that might lead to new ways of understanding the life and times around her? And with that understanding maybe create a different way of dealing with life. My pondering and wanting to be part of that changing art scene in parts of Asia you might call being a bit of a dreamer. But I think it's very important that

people allow themselves to dream in order to create alternative visions from that offered to us on a daily basis by the news and the entertainment industry.

What became important to me in the last decade were the many long and open dialogues I had with young artists from various Asian countries. And on top of that the unexpected confrontations with other cultures when organising exhibitions, or lecturing in Japan, China, South Korea, India etc. I can't say it always was successful but it has definitely been a fascinating journey. However there were moments when I felt yes what is happening over here in *this* project is important. If I limit myself to India it would be for instance the exhibition in India in 1999 at the Prince of Wales Museum or the development of a new curatorial exhibition concept for the Apeejay Media Gallery and their first publication. Or the exhibition 'CC: Crossing Currents-Video Art and Cultural Identity' at the Lalit Kala Akademi in New Delhi in 2004. When this bastion of conservatism for the first time was completely dedicated to video art and had so many thousands of young visitors - that was really a delight.

When we think about the democratisation of art and the idea of accessibility of the medium for the public...we realise that there are only certain communities, certain countries that have accessibility to this technology, isn't it a double edged sword in a way?

You are partly right when you refer to the technology that an artist needs to make advanced interactive *media projects*. But video is easy to access and is wide spread even in Asia. So I don't see accessing video a problem; the artist has to be open to it. What triggers and energises is when just a few artists in a country get into a project and their works are shown not only abroad but as well in their own community. This often stimulates a whole new generation of artists. That was one of the reasons when I was working for the World Wide Video Festival in Amsterdam that we started a program where we did not want only to bring video art from these countries to Amsterdam but we also wanted to show the works in the place where they came from. As such we started special research and development projects in China, India, South Africa and Brazil. What appeared to be a section in a huge international festival such as ours in Amsterdam became often something very special when shown at the original location. For instance in the case of India I had chosen to exhibit the new work of Nalini Malini, called 'Remembering Toba Tek Singh', in a popular museum in Bombay at the Coomaraswamy Hall in the Prince of Wales Museum. It was the first complex video installation made by an Indian artist and it used 4 video projectors and 12 monitors in trunks. It became a big hit and not only for the art community, we had 24,000 visitors in one week, from which the majority had no idea what video art was about. This public did not know that this medium

could even be used as an art form. For them it was some kind of 'exploding cinema'! It was like a collage of images where you yourself had to make the connections.

I like that term... 'Exploding cinema'!

'Cinema' as one of the main cultural expression of the twentieth century found its way into art experiments. What the artists finally did with it was deconstructing, colliding, etc. This led to various new forms of expression and views on contemporary times. The names given to these art forms vary from video art, electronic arts, new media art etc. all more or less pretty vague. It happens so often when I travel in Asia that people ask me with a kind of curious suspicion 'But what is this thing 'Video Art'?'. When I then describe it as 'exploding cinema' for some reason they open up and then a whole bunch of other more constructive questions are posed.

Over our conversations I understand that you appreciate painting and sculpture just as much as video art...

I'd like to ask why you chose to support and nurture video artists in such a committed way!

Indeed there is this feeling of commitment. In South Korea it even happened that a curator called me 'The Video Monk of India'! But I don't see it as blind mission. Honestly within the massive output of video art since the nineties in various countries, there are not so many works that will survive to the next generation. But that is not the criterion. It is about a whole new way of observing and being in contact with the world. And artists who for instance here in India started with exploring this art form were sticking out their necks. This was an art form that did not sell and still they had the inner urge to use it. I for myself found it important to share my expertise that I had built up in the West over a period of more than two decades with these artists. As such I went far beyond what normally a curator or writer does. Besides doing exhibitions as an independent curator in Asia I started a process in which I work in close cooperation with the Indian video artists. Often the conceptual as well as technical/ practical details of new video artworks are thrashed out together in detail. And I help in formulating artists' proposals for grants to foreign institutes or residencies. This might still be in the line of what a curator does but it also happens that I ended up behind the camera, or in the editing room. Even parts of my own body appear in some of the video works! Besides this in many cases I developed new ways for installing the works together with the artist in various places in India and as well in more than fifteen countries around the world. The last even when I was *not* the curator of the show! This is all voluntary work and in most cases unpaid and

without any formal credit. But that was not my target. In this way over the last ten years I have collaborated with many of the Indian video artists.

For me this 'altruistic' collaboration was not so unusual. I have been very taken with the Fluxus movement in art. In the 60s and 70s, with happenings, performances, video art, people wanted to break away from the establishment and artists wanted to go beyond the capitalist model that was ruling/ruining the world.

Suddenly in the Eighties there was a backlash and everything was going back to New Painting. Even a small sketch of the so called 'Trans Avant Garde' artists was sold for \$100 000.

It was revealing for me to see how young artists in the nineties did pick up again on these contentious issues and started to question the whole system of the art market, the prices, the whole merchandising of it. In those early days of revival I wanted to make available to this new generation the writings of important artists of those earlier periods - and if possible to link it to current times. That is why I developed publications such as: 'Fluxus: Yesterday and Today', 'World Wide Video', 'Art and Technology', 'Marina Abramovic-Cleaning the Body' and 'Writing as Sculpture' all published by Academy Editions in London in the early nineties.

Video played a crucial role during this period. And it proved to be the digital sketch toolbox and canvas of the nineties, ready for individual confrontations, performances, cultural activism, large scale city projects etc. Against the grain and the wishes of the gallery world it looks like it has taken a central position and will stay that way for a long time.

There is a lack of preciousness in the fact that you are dealing with a non-commodity art form. Within that lack of self-consciousness as an artist you are willing to make mistakes! It's like making work for the first time you don't really think you can produce something fantastic, and in that process you seem to work a little more freely perhaps?

The freedom in the production process is definitely innate in digital works. And a lot of the early video artworks I see from young artists all over Asia have this lucid approach. However in the process of globalisation even Indian video art is selling internationally just like any other medium. And now especially in the West you already see a new type of video art that is far beyond the earlier attitude of free experimentation. These projects need huge budgets to make and install and are now sought after by biennials and museums. The initial ideology of the medium has changed. In India there has been a momentum that you can create together, where the energies and motivations are shared with the larger public. It started in 1992 and 1993 when there were huge riots in Bombay, the explosions etc. This resulted in the artists wanting to speak out - to break out of the studio.

Women artists especially came out in full force as the rise of religious fundamentalism meant loss of their freedom. Men have made all the important decisions that chart the destinies of women. Women have to simply suffer it. These exigencies brought about a new art form by women artists in Bombay; to name a few Rummana Hussain Nalini Malani, Pushpamala N. and Navjot Altaf.

It also seems that the whole excess of capitalism had thrown things into this cycle. The way things transpired, not just in the art world but everywhere else! A kind of change in peoples' way of thinking and what they wanted in society... I remember the 80s, the Thatcher years in Britain, the art schools which were being dominated by this sense of capitalism and there was a growing resentment about the whole ideology. So in a way this movement which you talked about was part and parcel of that reaction?

Yes indeed. This process where capitalism became seemingly the only model for ruling the world had a final breakthrough after the Berlin wall fell. It was almost everywhere on the world - even countries like PR China and India who had a different direction for so many years that now the tide was changing. This led to protests in these two countries as well as whole new ways of experimenting in the art world.

It became clear that when art is sitting on its pedestal and observing *only* its own pedestal then it doesn't function in a society anymore ... and that could be dangerous! However after these years of protest and new experimentation nowadays we see a retrograde direction again in some of these countries in Asia. Maybe the last period of experimental art in India only lasted from about 1990 to 2005, after which the booming art market took over. Personally when I look at the art world from a global scale I do not see the frontier of art in the galleries, museums, auction houses or government-controlled interventions like Biennials. Luckily technology in this new era has provided us with the tools with which the individual can communicate outside the provided power structures. Not that it works like magic leading to change the whole thing but it certainly is gaining an influence as a form of cultural activism. That is the whole new role of the artists as a public figures that I was talking about already in 1994 with artists like Walter van der Cruysen in my publication 'Art and Technology'.

You are making use of the advantages that exist around you in order to inform yourself!

Yes knowledge of millions of people who lived before you and around you, have gone through certain ideas and traumas and certain expectations and wonderful events - you can share that!

The thing is that more than ever before we don't live a life of say 70 years, we live a life of 7 billion years because we have access to the life of all the other people. That was never the case and that's

like an ocean of knowledge, of creativity, that we can dive into and make use of. Unfortunately with all this historical and spiritual wealth around us, too often out of conservatism, ignorance, fear of the unknown and the hyping of emotions through the media that we start being aggressive!

Out of fear? Make one confront the demons you mean?

The demons are made in front of us and we have to demystify the demons. One set of people who are in the process of demystifying the demons are the artists... they always have been in that business and in that sense it's quite a unique profession!

Finally I wanted to ask you what is your most important accomplishment!

An important accomplishment becomes so if some other people consider it as such. For instance when I started organizing the exhibition 'CC: Crossing Currents -Video art and Cultural Identity' it was the artist Shilpa Gupta who came up to me enthusiastically and said,

"Johan, this is the first time in Indian history that a government institution has fully devoted itself to video art - this is something completely unique!". Or when a senior professor of the Jawaharlal Nehru University congratulated me on the same exhibition telling me: " Your show restored my belief in contemporary art again". Or later when we had our catalogues out, a young artist from Delhi suddenly came up to me and said shyly 'Thank you!' I asked 'Thank you for what?' She said 'For opening our eyes in Delhi. You made us look at curating in a whole new way!'

Through my curatorial activities in the past decade I have become aware that artists and the viewing public are going through transformations that are changing the ways of apprehending the art form.

But personally I enjoy completely different 'accomplishments' that take place as side events. As for instance when I was in Singapore for an exhibition at the Earl Lu gallery. At the swimming pool that a Chinese grandmother visited everyday: she stood alone by the side of the water when everybody else swam. Her little grandchild was with the mother in the water. Although I don't speak any Mandarin and there is a huge cultural difference, I managed to teach this lady of 75 years how to swim in a week's time!! And it turned out she was the favourite cook of Mao Tse-Tung - and that day was really something!

Earlier I spoke about creation of meaning. For this there has to be an openness on both sides. In the case of this lady of 75 we both had to cross certain cultural barriers, visions of perception. We both had the best of intentions but it was still like climbing a mountain with a real barrier! It's quite

challenging emotionally while we go through it. And that's what I try to achieve in my work as well. I see this as an open dialogue, a living flux where we share and collide our knowledge, creativity and energies in order to break through barriers. That's how I would love to define my way of working! To continue this journey in the way I have done in Asia some might say - you have to be very dedicated or maybe even a bit crazy.

But you have to be a little crazy! You have to be!!

Yesss, (laughing)

of course, you have to be a little crazy!!!