

Project Report

Unspeakably More: Naming, Deframing, lexicon for contemporary curatorship (Art after Space)

KHOJ co-organizes this seminar in association with n.e.w.s and Perriferry (Guwahati)

We maintain that art's condition is post-spatial, yet it is often frustrating to try and describe that condition with existing concepts and vocabularies. The deeper we got in our conversations – which included or even precluded the internet – the more superficial the available vocabulary seemed to be for what we were actually trying to postulate, describe, or invent.

The performative of “talking art” is something we have been recently discussing at n.e.w.s. In researching and writing our forthcoming book, Arbitrating Attention: reinvesting attention surplus in plausible artworlds as it is affectionately called, different courses of action have emerged, some inadvertently, others hammered out during our weekly Skype meetings or even real-world rendezvous. Somehow we are no longer submerged. What now comes to mind in anticipation of a weekend on the Brahmaputra at Periferry is not only the geophysical and geopolitical context – the water, the North East – but the symbolic dimension: the ferry as the meeting place, buoyancy enabling thoughts, the flux of ideas.

Everyone who is coming to Periferry has been involved to some extent in these preceding meetings whether by phone, email, Skype or face-to-face conversation. Thanks to all for your input and feedback so far. The search, so to speak, is now on, for whatever the outcome of bringing together your energies and whatever verbal conundrums we can hatch on a ferryboat the banks of the Brahmaputra.

We invite all those attending as well as anyone else who would like to join the Unspeakably More Forum. Please sign up as a user and add comments. Our intention is to enable a live-stream, or at least a live blog at times – depending on the goodwill of the local government, 3-G possibilities, satellites and the actual position of the boat...thanks to Desire Machine Collective and Arts Collaboratory for their support.

With this short lead-in to Stephen's introduction, let us commence the prelude to the weekend seminar in Guwahati: “Unspeakably More”: Naming, Deframing: a lexicon for contemporary curatorship.

‘Unspeakably More depends on what things are called than on what they are. (...) Let us not forget that in the long run it is enough to create new names and plausibilities in order to create new "things".’

Naming

As art making continues to undergo deep changes in terms of its mode of visibility, perhaps the most urgent challenge for curatorship is not so much to expand its repertory of exhibition making than to develop a new lexicon of conceptual vocabulary, better suited to grasping art's new modes of visibility. For in times of the emergence of the new, it is crucial as Nietzsche put it in *The Gay Science*

to recognize that “unspeakably more depends on what things are called than on what they are... Let us not forget,” he goes on, “that in the long run it is enough to create new names and plausibilities in order to create new ‘things’.” If it is to have a useful critical edge, naming must be a tool for undoing apparent self-evidences – that “misty mantle of illusion,” as Nietzsche then caustically put it, “that counts as essential, so-called ‘reality’.” Taking its cue from this intuition, the premise for this three-day gathering, co-organised by KHOJ and n.e.w.s. to be held on the Periferry in Guwahati, is a desire to sharpen the use of theory in curatorial discourse.

Deframing

Our artworlds are rife with pretentious banter cloaking itself as theory (experimental this, creative that, post thingamajig) and we are well inspired to be wary of word games calling themselves “theory.” “Unspeakably More” is less concerned with that branch of language use called theory than with how naming – and renaming, de-naming, ascriptions, assignations and their undoing – takes place and how it can be rethought. Hence the desire to recalibrate our conceptual vocabulary to describe simply and accurately the types of practices that are emerging today and which suffer at the hands of twentieth-century descriptions. Indeed, if we are even to perceive collectively what art practitioners are up to, and where they are investing their creative energies, we need the naming tools to grasp their originality.

Toward an online lexicon

The point, of course, is not to promote some sort of curatorial newspeak, but, on the contrary to debunk the oldspeak; to propose an infinitesimal yet decisive shift in our use of terminology to more accurately grasp real practices. “Unspeakably More” will be a first step toward producing an online lexicon (hosted by n.e.w.s.) for curatorship on the cusp of a new paradigm.

Art after space

Perhaps the primary self-evidence to challenge is that curating is about framing. If indeed, curating is ultimately about reframing, it is first of all about de-framing. Not about framing objects in space, but de-framing ways of looking. To put it differently, the proposal is to consider curatorially speaking “art after space,” bearing in mind the performative paradox of that formula: art wants space; yet art’s condition today is post-spatial. For one of the great challenges today, both in curatorship and in social practices at large, is to insist upon plural temporalities, rather than conforming to dominant timeframes. This is a crucial political issue and perhaps the deeper meaning of time-based art – and as such, an unavoidable question for curators.

Competence crossing

From a logistic point of view, “Unspeakably More” will avoid both a segregated ‘symposium’ format conducive to academics alone and the pitfalls of ‘workshopping’ (comprised as it is of ‘work’ and ‘shopping’). Instead we are venturing to imagine something more organically integrated, bearing in mind that the presentations and panels and performances are merely focal points in a longer-term project and not necessarily the places where knowledge and insights into a renewed conceptual vocabulary will be produced. The event will thus be “curated” in such a way, and with such invitees, as to foster the kind of competence-crossing conducive to producing knowledge in suitably slack conditions.

