

Unspeakably More

Submitted by [Parchai](#) on Tue, 2009-09-22 06:29

Seminar on the Brahmaputra and online forum

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'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".'

In the course of thinking through our symposium on curatorship under the broad title Art after Space, our original concept has morphed into something else. The above statement is Stephen's premise about how to incite a discussion, actually focus on having that discussion as the event, not as a secondary action to an exhibition or what has been termed the "pedagogical turn" in contemporary art.

During the past months we have been organising with [Khoj](#) this real time and online forum at n.e.w.s. Our reconnaissance trip to Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore last April enabled us to take apart the concept of Art After Space. 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, we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?

Deframing: a lexicon for contemporary curatorship.

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, assignments 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.

[Unspeakably More LIVE video stream](#)

Submitted by [Parchai](#) on Sat, 2009-10-03 03:10

is up at <http://northeastwestsouth.net/node/398>.

[Penumbrae's query for shadow](#)

Submitted by [Nishant Shah](#) on Sat, 2009-10-03 11:42

Taking from our conversations across the days, about the relationships between light and shadow, the hierarchies of the substance and its grey economies, the taxonomies of naming that emerge from the impulse to discover (and reproduce) the shadow as contingent upon light, here is a fable from China (in English translation) which might help complicate these relationships.

Penumbra said to Shadow, 'A little while ago you were walking and now you're standing still; a little while ago you were sitting and now you're standing up. Why this lack of independent action [tecao]?'

Shadow said, 'Do I have to wait for something before I can be like this? Does what I wait for also have to wait for something before it can be like this? Am I waiting for the scales of a snake or the wings of a cicada? How do I know why it is so? How do I know why it isn't so?'

Penumbrae once asked Shadow, 'A little while ago you were looking down and now you're looking up, a little while ago your hair was bound up and now it's hanging loose, a little while ago you were sitting and now you're standing up, a little while ago you were walking and now you're still - why is this?'

Shadow said, 'Quibble, quibble! Why bother asking about such things? I have them but I don't know how. I'm the shell of the cicada,

the cast-off skin of the snake - like them and yet not like them. In firelight or sunlight I draw together, in darkness or night I fade away. Am I not dependent on the substance from which I am thrown? And that substance is itself dependent on something else! When it comes, I come with it; when it goes, I go with it. When it comes under the influence of the strong Yang, I come under the same. Since we are both produced by that strong Yang, what occasion is there for you to question me?"

This well-known fable from Zhuangzi appears in 'Making All Things Equal' and 'Fables' in the above two slightly different versions. In the exegetical traditions, Guo Xiang has annotated wangliang (shade, penumbrae) as 'the slight shade outlining a shadow'.

According to ancient exegeses, this is a fable that explicates a philosophical thought by way of the question-answer between penumbrae and shadow. We will here forget for the moment any ancient or mystic philosophy and return to this staging of a question and answer between penumbrae and shadow. As subjects of speech in everyday life in the present moment, we have become used to listening to 'form-substance' (xing) speak, while shadow which follows substance is usually thought of as less than subject.

Shadow is the darkness that follows or attends upon form-substance when and where there is light. Shadow comes together and changes following substance and light. Not only does shadow not have self-autonomy, she lacks constancy and loyalty. Time, space, light, direction, distance and speed can all make her change, like the rudder of a boat in strong wind. Yet, should one want to get rid of shadow in the manner of throwing away an old shoe, one will find that she cannot be trampled into disappearance. As long as there is light, shadow is that silent darkness that cannot be shed.

When substance runs from shadow in the light of day, substance can run to the death, shadow would still be there, unless substance were to enter into darkness, too. Penumbra, that slight shade outlining shadow, the shadow of a shadow, is that nothing or no-matter that everyone had almost forgotten. Penumbra is too far away from substance to be seen or discerned. Penumbra, or wangliang, is not a common usage; it has nothing to do with the language of the everyday. We need a dictionary, an exegetical text, to understand what it means; many have come to know the term first, and then turned to examine their shadow. Besides the shadow, which is without subjectivity, there is penumbra that is even less a subject. If penumbra's existence is hard to detect, then, penumbra's followings, its attendances or lack of independence, its transformations, its lack of integrity, all of these are even more difficult to know.

All blurred indeterminacies that cannot be named are termed 'penumbrae' in the plural (zhong wangliang). Penumbra, or wangliang are seen as not having character(istics) while their form-substance cannot be outlined. They remain in the margin of shadow where people cannot see them, stealing a life (gouqie tousheng).

And yet, this story has it so that wangliang should ask a question!

Has shadow answered her question?

If shadow represents the voice of Zhuangzi in the fable, then, she speaks of the Zhuangzi philosophy of non-dependence or non-attendance (wudai) and self-transformation (duhua).

But whose or what question has shadow answered?

Has shadow heard penumbra, can shadow understand penumbra's questions?

Substance never appears in this fable, yet s/he is everywhere (addressed), in the text, in the readings and exegeses, but also in the answer given by shadow. Shadow's thought, her speech, are all addressed to substance. In relation to substance, perhaps shadow is speaking of another inter-subjective mode of thought. But does this mode of thought answer penumbra's question?

Penumbra's conditions of existence are different from that of shadow. Perhaps penumbra admires how shadow constantly transforms; or penumbra is curious about shadow's changing postures and hairdo. Penumbra may well have its own particular mode of 'independent action' (tecao, 'hold onto') and wants to share this with shadow.

Perhaps the dependency or attendance that shadow speaks of is a familiar story or condition of existence or irrelevant philosophy for penumbra. Penumbra's question, on the other hand, is about 'independent action'. Shadow cannot see this and does not understand. Yet, in being questioned and in shadow's answer and rethinking of the question, penumbra's questions inspire and incite shadow while completing shadow's alternative (to substance's) subjectivity.

Penumbra continues to question, again and again.

[Easy Listening](#)

Submitted by [Parchai](#) on Thu, 2009-12-24 19:21

Here are the audio files from the [Unspeakably More](#) weekend at [Periferry](#) on the Brahmaputra. It's only 10 hours and there are 19 files in total.

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<http://northeastwestsouth.net/uploads/UnspeakablyMoreDay1c.mp3>

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