

ENCOUNTERS

ALICJA DOBRUCKA

ESSAY BY RANJIT HOSKOTE

30th APRIL, 2015 - 28th MAY, 2015

TARQ

INTRODUCTION

The Polish Institute in New Delhi, in collaboration with the Tarq Gallery, is delighted to introduce the Encounters exhibition by Alicja Dobrucka (Poland) to Mumbai audiences. Encounters showcases the results of Dobrucka's project that originally started in Mumbai in 2012. The Polish Institute established a working relationship with Alicja in India and, since then, has continued to encourage the development of her work. The project has continued with artistic actions in both Palestine and Turkey. The Institute feels that showing the project where it originally began closes the project's artistic circle.

What makes Encounters unique is the interconnectivity of traditional Polish craftwork, "Lowickie" paper-cut (Lowickie Wycinanki), which is 'translated' into the traditional craft expressions of other parts of the world – India, in particular. The end result becomes artwork that reveals the

process of intercultural transformation through a visual dialogue of craft traditions that remains relevant in the context of contemporary art. In Encounters, local Indian craftsmen use their own distinctive craft techniques, replacing unknown elements with their imaginations, to produce innovative translations of Polish paper cut images. In her project, Alicja not only reaches out to traditional craftsmen, but also asks artists of other creative mediums to deliver their interpretations of Polish folklore. Encounters presents embroidery, wood carvings, pen drawings, wood block design, taxi stickers and Bollywood paintings; transformations of traditions into objects of new value. We look forward to seeing the ongoing evolution of the Encounters journey.

– Anna Tryc-Bromley

Director of the Polish Institute in New Delhi

ABOUT THE POLISH INSTITUTE IN INDIA

Established in New Delhi in June 2012, the Polish Institute is an extension of the Polish diplomatic mission to India. Polish Institutes are present globally in Europe, North America and Asia. Their aim is the promotion of Poland and Polish culture through public events, in collaboration with local organizations. The Polish Institute in New Delhi expresses itself through contemporary projects built in cooperation with India's leading talents and institutions, in order to contribute relevant programming within the cultural sector. Through shared professional exchanges, cultural understanding is nurtured in order to build a strong platform for on-going dialogue and exchange. The Institute works primarily in the disciplines of visual art, design, literature, music, theatre, film, architecture and academic research.

Polish Institute

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ARTIST'S NOTE

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ALICJA DOBRUCKA
Traditional paper cut out
17.8 x 17.8 inches
Łowicz, Poland
2011



ALICJA DOBRUCKA | KINNI PAREKH
Mixed Media on Silk (Zardozi)
17.8 x 17.8 inches
Mumbai, India
2012



ALICJA DOBRUCKA | SAMEER MANOHAR MISTRY
Sticker Collage
18.1 x 15.8 inches
Mumbai, India
2013



ALICJA DOBRUCKA | JEFFER ROGER
Gold leaf and ink on paper (Tezhip)
10 x 7.4 inches
Sivas, Turkey
2014



ALICJA DOBRUCKA | MUSTAFA ARGUT
Steel and bone knife
11.9 x 2 inches
Sivas, Turkey
2014



ALICJA DOBRUCKA | NADIA FROM JERUSALEM
Thread work on Cotton (Cross Stitch)
18.5 x 18.9 inches
Ramallah, Palestine
2012



ALICJA DOBRUCKA | ABBAS GALWANI
Clay
25 x 25 inches
Mumbai, India
2013



ALICJA DOBRUCKA | MEHMET ALI DÜZÜN
Ink on paper (Ebru/Marbling)
17.3 x 23.7 inches
Sivas, Turkey
2014



ALICJA DOBRUCKA | WEAVERS CENTER MUMBAI/MINAXI PANDYA (BLOCK DESIGN)
Ink on silk (Block print)
51.1 x 84.7 inches
Mumbai, India
2013



ALICJA DOBRUCKA | BALKRUSHNA WAYADANDE
Digital Image
Installation Dimensions Variable
Mumbai, India
2013

FAMILY RESEMBLANCES:

Travel, Translation and the Multiple Lives of an Image in Alicja Dobrucka's Encounters

Ranjit Hoskote

In the period of cultural production that we may provisionally describe as the 'contemporary', the classical fixities of medium, style and location have long ago been displaced by experimental, improvisational and transitive strategies of art-making. Some of the processes of art-making have been distributed over a field of collaborative action. Some of the outcomes of art have been dematerialized and are no longer resident in objects. Art can insert itself or be activated in the interweave between domains that had previously been held apart by the conventions of cultural taxonomy, such as the gallery and the street, culture and technology, the museum and political space, the image and language. Many artists work with a post-medium or trans-medium understanding of how a particular artistic adventure might be manifested or articulated. Style, far from being an aprioristic premise that defined the formation of a body of work in advance, is now to be deduced after the fact as a pattern or persistence. The location of art-making is as diverse as the range of concerns, projects and production systems with which an artist might

be engaged: the studio can be as large and expansive as a city or a mapping across cities and societies, or as small and portable as a laptop; it might occupy the space of a suite of preparatory photographs or drawings, or it might unfold in the temporary settlement zone of a residency programme.

In the work of the 1985-born Polish artist Alicja Dobrucka, who lives and works in London and Bombay, this legacy of the contemporary ensures that the experience of travel is at once a mode of research, a mobile studio, and a medium. While I hesitate to subject the artist to the burden of history (she was only four years old when the Berlin Wall came down thus opening up the Warsaw Pact countries to the world after a seclusion that had lasted for four decades), it is possible that her curiosity about the many elsewheres that this planet offers, about the lives, imaginations and creative potentialities of distant others, is conditioned by the residual collective memory of a society whose members were for many years circumscribed by strict regulations on travel.

Accordingly, transcultural engagement serves as the conceptual basis and operational mode for Dobrucka's ongoing project, Encounters, a conceptually informed collaborative project that straddles several economies of cultural production. Encounters, which began in 2011, takes shape through a shuttling between art and craft, an individuated studio practice and a demand-driven batch production model. Its point of departure is a traditional Polish paper cutout image, which Dobrucka has taken on a journey through various countries, inviting local craftspersons in India, Palestine and Turkey to respond to it by producing the original design using their own distinctive techniques, materials and vocabularies.

This travelling image is a decorative roundel with an implied line dividing it into vertical halves; across this line, two roosters face and mirror one another. The roundel is filled in with floral flourishes and rendered in polychrome, with green, yellow, red and blue prominent. It is an example of wycinanki, a folk art that became popular during the mid-19th century; these paper cutouts were pasted on furniture or rafters, used as window decorations, and exchanged as gifts. Various regions in Poland developed their signature versions of the folk art; for instance, wycinanki-makers in the Kurpie region preferred monochrome compositions, while their counterparts in Łowicz (which Dobrucka uses) preferred polychrome. A form of paper sculpture, wycinanki took flowers as well as symbolic or heraldic birds such as roosters and peacocks as its subject matter.

Through the numerous encounters that Dobrucka has choreographed, the roosters of Łowicz have manifested themselves in diverse avatars, in situations as far apart as the shantytown of

Dharavi, a hub of Bombay's informal labour sector, the embattled cities of Ramallah and Nablus in Palestine, and the historic Turkish city of Sivas. The embroiderers with whom the artist has worked in Bombay, whether in the Gujarati style or in the zardozi idiom, have been literal in their interpretation; the cross-stitch embroiderers of Ramallah in Palestine have invented new geometries of habitation for the original image, as well as a more restrained palette; the roosters have also been incorporated into the border of a kaffiyeh or headcloth by a seamstress in Ramallah. A wood-carver in Nablus, Palestine, has memorialized the roosters in the heartwood of an olive tree, while in Eid, elsewhere in Palestine, a sculptor who works with discarded plastic pieces has been working on rendering the Polish image through this recycled medium.

A block-print maker working at the Weavers Service Centre, Bombay, has refigured the Slavic rooster as a bird from Indic mythology. A cinema-hoarding artist in Bombay has whimsically and magically translated the image as the posters of legendary films, with the roosters standing in for the protagonists of Mughal-e-Azam and Mother India. Some of the street artists of Colaba, in downtown Bombay, have rendered the image using train tickets, or on a peepal leaf, or as taxi stickers. Meanwhile, in Sivas, a jeweller has translated the image as a beaten-silver panel and on the hilt of a ceremonial dagger, while an ebru or marbling artist and a tehzip or illuminated book artist have incorporated it into their sophisticated languages.

The additive, transcultural collection of objects that has resulted from this unfolding journey is one physical manifestation of the Encounters project; another is the video documentation of Dobrucka's interactions and dialogues with her collaborators.

In the process, a variety of practices are disclosed and brought together, including the raw and the refined, recycling and draughtsmanship, innovation and adaptation. The transmigration of Dobrucka's image has ranged across a spectrum of cultural economies from classical guild lineages and domestic traditions to freshly invented vernaculars of collage and bricolage. This traversal of practices celebrates, sometimes in the most hostile circumstances of abjection and marginalization – whether in besieged Palestine, run-down Dharavi, or the frayed metropolitan edge of the Colaba street – the resilience and ingenuity of the human desire to create and assert itself against the conspiracies of destiny.

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Like all transcultural projects, Encounters involves a negotiation with the horizons of translation, with the act of bridging the gap between languages, skills and world-views, so that a measure of understanding and mutuality may be achieved between otherwise dissimilar individuals and situations. In this regard, the strategy of subjecting an archetype or template to a series of unforeseen encounters, transformations on impact and situations of syntactic slippages is a lively one. It produces fresh cultural impulses and artefacts as it goes, and does not simply translate. Of course, as all translators know, there is never a 'simple translation'. And indeed, by underscoring the avatar principle, Encounters questions the aura of primordial authenticity that resides in the notion of an 'original'.

While the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer proposed his theory of the 'fusion of horizons' as a means of addressing the problem of interpreting, re-imagining and mentally acclimatizing ourselves within the classical from a

contemporary standpoint, his hermeneutics may well be deployed more horizontally and across various idioms of the contemporary, separated from one another by asymmetries of economic and cultural capital and by political constraints. The challenge of translating an image has been one of the principal modes of approaching a fusion of horizons, between Dobrucka and her collaborators and their respective practices; and yet, importantly, translation never produces identity between the 'original' and its translated avatar. Rather, there is always a space between them, the revelatory space of versionality, where horizons are multiplied and refracted rather than simply mapped onto one another and mirrored. The space of versionality is also the productive space where questions arise.

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The traditional conception of the artist casts her as a creator who explores her subjectivity in relation to her encounter with the world, and whose art-work is an expressive account of this exploration. The key motifs of such a conception are the autonomy of the individual artistic imagination, the originality and formal achievement of the singular art-work, and the recognizable coherence of the artistic practice across its outcomes. A more contemporary conception of the artist casts her as a researcher, a compiler of archives, a collector of ephemera who is alert to the pressures exerted by political and economic processes, as well as by the institutionality of the art world, on her practice. She works, often, through collaborative processes and emphasizes that the authorship of a project is often distributed across a collective of producers. Questions of equity, citizenship and the reclamation of social and public space are vital to her practice; and the art-work is often mercurial and mutable, comprising both object

and documentation, the products as well as the processes that have generated them.

Encounters begins with the hospitable gesture of an invitation to share in a journey, to look at resources together, to compare working notes and establish a relationship of trust and collegiality. The 'original' prompt, now immured within a Polish museum context or lost to tourism kitsch, is reactivated in other contexts, other predicaments, where the same questions of the fate of an art may be posed. The original and its avatars are held together by a set of 'family resemblances', to deploy Wittgenstein's powerful concept, which do not reduce the avatars to shadows or corrupt versions of the pristine original, but rather, embrace variation and recalibration. The outcomes of the project are not only the objects themselves, but also the more political questions that we are provoked to ask about and around them: questions concerning the supposed distinctions between the arts and the crafts, and the status of the 'folk', 'tribal' or 'outsider' artist. Each of these categories is in fact a stigmatization marking exclusion from the terrain of high art, as sanctified by the academy and the art market; this taxonomy was constructed by an imperial ethnography that was as colonialist as it was patriarchal.

Dobrucka's strategy of using a so-called 'decorative', 'craft' or 'folk art' form as a prompt to the process demonstrates political acumen: the image may appear traditional, but its transmigration exposes contemporary political, economic and existential urgencies. The artist is preoccupied with the idea that craft is the source of art, that there is a visceral connection between the Handwerk and the Kunstwerk. Art, she argues, existed in women's work, in the spaces of intimacy and domesticity, even before academies,

museums and galleries institutionalized art-making. She points to the paradox that, even as craft is a "feminized and marginalized" form, it remains widespread, whether in the emporium economy for the tourism and heritage industries, or as pressganged into the service of an ideology of cultural authenticity in the museum or nationalist discourse. This split of the perception and reception of craft between the domains of the museum and of kitsch fascinates the artist.

Thus, far from subscribing to traditional ethnographic readings of the pre-modern or pre-industrial, Encounters is a playful yet engaged interrogation of this framework. In addressing the circumstances of production, for instance, Dobrucka makes it clear that the crafts are already industrialized today, whether in their pragmatic stance towards the world or in their logic of batch production; neither the crafts nor their practitioners, who have been schooled in the harsh pedagogy of adversity and survival, can entertain an idyllic innocence about their place in the world. By inviting her viewers into a consideration of the complex issues of creativity, livelihood, dialogue and survival that are at stake, Alicja Dobrucka asserts the sometimes abrasively intimate relationship between the material and the imaginative economies, and dramatizes the inequity that divides various sectors of artistic production, and the uneven contours of the contemporary, inhabited as it is by claimants who proceed from very different reserves of skill, vision, opportunity and entitlement.

(Berlin, April 2015)

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BIOGRAPHIES

Alicja Dobrucka was born Poland in 1985. Her work has received the highly competitive Deutsche Bank Fine Art Award and Grant in Photography. In 2011 she was a recipient of the Sotiri Prize, Korce, Albania.

Dobrucka has exhibited her work internationally, most recently at the South Kiosk Gallery in London. In January 2015 she was a participant of the Plat(t)form event at the Winterthur Museum of Photography. In 2014 her work was a part of the 'Death and Dying' exhibition at the MAG3 Gallery in Vienna, Austria, curated by David Lillington.

In 2012 her work was a part of group exhibitions at The Barbican in London and Concrete in Common at the Kunst Raum Riehen in Basel, Switzerland. She has also exhibited her work at Experimenta EXD'11 - Architectural Biennale in Lisbon (2011), as a part of the Bloomberg New Contemporaries at the ICA, London and the S1 Art Space and Site Gallery in Sheffield (2011), the 54th Venice Biennale with the WW Gallery (2011) and at the Photographers' Gallery, London (2010).

Her work has been widely published in e.g. *Damn Magazine*, London (2015), *Artsy Artist Feature* (2015), *Contemporary Lynx*, London (2015), *Magenta Magazine*, Poland (2015), *Art4d Magazine*, Bangkok, Thailand (2014), *Aesthetica Magazine* (2014), *Dezeen* (2014), *Domus*, Italy (2011 and 2014), *HotShoe International - artist feature* (2011), *HESA in Print* (2011), *Magenta Flash Forward*, Canada (2010), *Assembly Journal*, *Artist Feature*, Canada (2010).

She is based in London since graduating from the University of the Arts London in 2010. She is currently in India preparing for an exhibition at the Tate Liverpool in May, curated by Anna Fox.

Ranjit Hoskote is a cultural theorist, curator and poet. He is the author of more than 25 books, including *Vanishing Acts: New & Selected Poems 1985-2005* (Penguin, 2006) and *Central Time* (Penguin/ Viking, 2014). With Maria Hlavajova, he is editor of *Future Publics: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art* (BAK, forthcoming).

Since 1993, Hoskote has curated 30 exhibitions of contemporary art, including two monographic surveys of Atul Dodiya (Bombay: *Labyrinth/ Laboratory*, Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 2001; and *Experiments with Truth: Atul Dodiya, Works 1981-2013*, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 2013), a lifetime retrospective of Jehangir Sabavala (National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay and New Delhi, 2005-2006), a historical survey of Indian abstraction, *Nothing is Absolute* (with Mehli Gobhai; CSMVS/ The Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay, 2013), and a survey of 150 years of art by Parsi artists contextualised within the narrative of an emergent Indian modernism, *No Parsi is an Island* (with Nancy Adajania; National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay, 2013-2014).

Hoskote co-curated the 7th Gwangju Biennale with Okwui Enwezor and Hyunjin Kim (2008) and was the curator of India's first-ever national pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2011). He was co-convenor, with Maria Hlavajova, Boris Groys and Kathrin Rhombert, of the exhibition-conference platform *Former West Congress: Documents, Constellations, Prospects* (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2013). Hoskote sits on the academic advisory board of the Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong; the international advisory board of the Bergen Triennial, Norway; the advisory board of the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation, Bombay; and the programme advisory board of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

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