
SAVIOURS AND SPECTACLES

Amid calls for shows to be cancelled and works of art destroyed, issues surrounding cultural appropriation, censorship and freedom of expression remain as complex and multifarious as ever. Elizabeth Fullerton asks why the best intentions aren't always enough when taking your cue from another culture.

Who has the right to tell what story? Last year, accusations of cultural poaching were levelled at Damien Hirst, there were renewed complaints about museums exhibiting the artist Jimmie Durham – whose self-identification as Cherokee is not recognized by any of the three Cherokee Nations – and a firestorm of protests blew up around the treatment of non-white trauma by white artists Dana Schutz and Sam Durant.

"There's still this white saviour complex that needs to be really reflected on by whoever's trying to make work or statements to relate to other people's experiences," says the young African American artist Parker Bright, who in March staged a protest at the Whitney Museum in front of Schutz's controversial 2016 painting Open Casket, portraying Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American boy mutilated and killed in 1955 by two white racists from Mississippi. For two days Bright wore a t-shirt bearing the words "Black Death Spectacle" and talked to museum-goers about his objections to the painting. "It's like it's still a form of colonialism," he adds, drawing a parallel between white artists' depiction of black pain and American foreign policy efforts to spread its brand of democracy around the world.

The spectre of cultural colonialism reared its head this past summer at the Venice Biennale when Victor Ehikhamenor, one of the artists representing Nigeria's first-ever pavilion, took to Instagram to vent against Damien Hirst. His objection was that Hirst, reportedly the world's richest artist, had included a bust resembling a Nigerian fourteenth-century Ife Head without proper credit among the supposedly rescued artefacts in his blockbuster Venice exhibition Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable. "I am not particularly against getting inspiration from other iconic works like this, but don't weave a warp narrative around it and commercialize it to your own benefit. This was an outright copy with very minimal alterations," Ehikhamenor subsequently wrote to the Huffington Post. "It borders on the line of broad daylight robbery. One must also be mindful of the past relationship Nigeria has with Britain in regards to carting away some of our best works during the Benin punitive expedition of 1897."

Cultural appropriation is of course nothing new. The Romans appropriated Greek styles, the Renaissance looked to classical antiquity, European modernists like Picasso and André Derain sought inspiration from African cultural artefacts. Postcolonial studies highlighted the fine line between assimilation and appropriation in art and some of the problems around representations of difference. Appropriation only really seems uncontroversial when the culture being appropriated is that of the dominant oppressor. Some artists of colour have exercised a degree of reverse appropriation, mining the conventions of western painting to redress stereotypical depictions of race in art. No one would take issue, for example, with Kehinde Wiley's celebratory large-scale portraits of black and brown people in heroic poses borrowed from European old masters.

But it can become problematic to restrict one community to speaking only about their own sphere of experience, as if ownership of a subject were decided on the grounds of skin colour, gender or sexuality. Kara Walker wrote on Instagram in response to the polemic around Schutz's painting: "I am more than a woman, more than the descendant of Africa, more than my father's daughter. More than black more than the sum of my experiences thus far."

As a white artist Sam Durant feels not just entitled but compelled to educate white audiences about the history of white oppression. "It's very important for white people as a community to start to hear about the other side of history. White artists are positioned to tell that story, not to speak for others but to speak for themselves," he says. "So many activists for social and racial justice acknowledge that since racism is a system created by white people for their benefit, they must be involved in its dismantling."

Cross-pollination of cultures is a fact in today's globalized world and it has been vastly accelerated by the internet. Images of police brutality, of human rights abuses and of conflict from America to China are readily available for mass consumption and dissemination. Artists are often well-placed to interpret their significance with sensitivity and to bring their own unique slant to social media polemics.

A case in point is Luke Willis Thompson's moving silent film portrait of Diamond Reynolds, who live-streamed on Facebook the aftermath of her African American partner's 2016 killing by a policeman. Willis Thompson's motivation was to think about the function and effect of images of violence on social media and what an aesthetic reflection of the movement Black Lives Matter might mean. The resulting black-and-white film

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Luke Willis Thompson
Autoportrait, 2017

Autoportrait (2017), shown at Chisenhale Gallery in London over the summer, was made in close collaboration with Reynolds and presented a counter to the much-viewed cameraphone video of her partner's shooting: in place of vulnerability it showed strength; instead of panic, restraint and stillness. The key in treating such a fraught subject was informed consent, says Willis Thompson, who is of Fijian ancestry. The work managed to avoid being exploitative or obvious, instead encompassing questions around performance, memory and, more broadly, race and justice.

Artists from Ai Weiwei to Banksy have been moved by news images of suffering, whether of a drowned Syrian toddler washed up on a Greek beach or of Israeli human rights abuses against Palestinians. While such activist art has been criticized by some as exploiting tragedy, it can nonetheless raise awareness of humanitarian issues that affect the world. If artists are supposed to stick to their own cultures, then such works could not exist. Censorship is the logical progression of assigning ownership to pain.

The British artist Hannah Black caused uproar in the art community earlier this year when she wrote an open letter to the Whitney calling for Schutz's work to be removed and destroyed. "Hannah Black and company are placing themselves on the wrong side of history, together with Phalangists who burned books, authoritarian regimes that censor culture and imprison artists, and religious fundamentalists who ban artworks in the name of their god," the artist and academic Coco Fusco wrote in Hyperallergic. Schutz's painting stayed the course of the Whitney Biennial, but the furore refused to die down even after the show ended. In August local artists and activists wrote to the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston demanding that it cancel a major solo show of Schutz's work, prompting seventy-eight members of the National Academy of Art – among them Cindy Sherman, Jack Whitten and Dread Scott – to pen a letter in defence of Schutz and artistic freedom.

But should all art be considered sacrosanct irrespective of its content and the suffering it causes? The answer was ultimately "no" in the case of Sam Durant's sculpture Scaffold (2012), which sparked protests from the Dakota community in Minneapolis after it was displayed by the Walker Art Center. Durant agreed to dismantle his sculpture depicting seven gallows used in US state-sanctioned executions between 1859 and 2006, including the 1862 hanging of thirty-eight Dakota men in Mankato, Minnesota. "I heard that the Dakota community were genuinely traumatized by seeing the image of the Mankato gallows," explains Durant. "I don't want my work to do that in any way and that's why I agreed to take it down. A line had been crossed, I can't allow my work to harm those it is trying to be aligned with."

One thing these episodes have highlighted is the crucial role of museums and galleries in dealing with issues around cultural appropriation. An artwork can be a safe place to direct a lot of emotions that bubble to the surface around traumatizing events, but institutions need to provide proper context and preferably organize discussions between different parties so that opposing voices can be aired. Mia Locks, co-curator of the Whitney Biennial, says that museums are at their best "enabling public agency and communicative exchange between a diverse range of subjects. This is the opposite of reconciliation or consensus, more like what [French philosopher Jacques] Rancière would call dissensus."

The Walker's response in setting up a mediated dialogue and agreeing to the dismantling of an artwork it owned was highly unusual. Most of the time museums will weather a storm but avoid taking drastic action. Hirst's exhibition at Venice's Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana remained intact; Jimmie Durham's touring retrospective went ahead at the Walker Art Center and then the Whitney; Dana Schutz's show at ICA Boston was not cancelled. The Whitney allowed Bright's protest and added context to the Schutz painting after the outcry, but there was no mediated dialogue with the artist comparable to that initiated by the Walker.

Both Durant and Olga Viso [the Walker Art Center's former executive director] accept that they made a big mistake in not reaching out to the Dakota in planning the installation and in failing to recognize their unresolved historical pain. The Walker has now instituted an education programme for staff around Minnesota history and has set plans in motion for ongoing dialogue with the indigenous community, according to Viso. Meanwhile, Locks's takeaway from the Schutz experience was "that we don't need to agree about art." She adds, "the most important thing is to support engagement and to acknowledge the significance of an artwork's reception. That is part of its meaning after all."

Whether or not one agrees with the institutions' handling of these controversies, the consequent publicity and exchange of views around shameful episodes of history and racial injustice is surely positive in furthering understanding and harmony. "That history [of persecution of the Dakota people] has been highly, highly suppressed here, so now Sam's work, the questions that it asked, the challenges that it faced, has brought international awareness to this," says Viso. "Confederate monuments are being taken down all over the country. In some ways, maybe this portended that shift and this reckoning of history that is underway in America."

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10 THINGS ABOUT SEX

By Muriel Zagha

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1. THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

When I was a teenager growing up in France the TV channel Canal+ started screening porn films. Only subscribers could see them; to others they were "encrypted", the images pixelated and the sound distorted. So for many of us in that pre-internet age our first experience of graphic porn was a puzzle, a kind of primal scene prompting the questions: What the hell is going on there? What's that noise? And what's that thing filling the screen?

2. WELL, THAT ESCALATED QUICKLY

Now that we are more concerned than ever with issues of consent and inappropriate behaviour, it is illuminating to dip into a different reality: France in the 1830s. In Balzac's novel Le Lys dans la vallée, a young man finds himself sitting next to a married woman he does not know at a ball. At the sight of her bare shoulders he experiences a hallucinatory rush of desire and throws himself at her, rubbing his face against her skin voraciously. Somewhat anticlimactically, they fall in love without consummating their relationship, and she eventually dies of grief.

3. FROTTAGE

"Language is a skin," wrote French critic Roland Barthes in A Lover's Discourse, "I rub my language against the other." Rolling your tongue around somebody's name, being overcome with the compulsion to mention them in any conversation, resisting that compulsion, giving in – it's all friction.

4. NO EXIT

In his duet with Jane Birkin, the long-censored "Je t'aime moi non plus", Serge Gainsbourg utters the line "L'amour physique est sans issue." (There is no way out of physical love.) The powerfully suggestive "Je t'aime", with its moans and sighs, has had a long career as a making-out song, and yet Gainsbourg always insisted it was an "anti-fuck" song about the desperation of physical love.

5. INTERGALACTIC

An understanding of sex in cinema first came to me in searing fragments – film clips seen out of context. A terrifying Technicolor sequence from Michael Powell's 1947 Black Narcissus, in which a crazed nun attacks her rival in love and attempted to push her off a cliff; a scene from Paul Morrissey's 1974 Blood for Dracula, in which the vampire pounces on a young woman, only to throw up after unwittingly swallowing her non-virginal blood. Enigmatic, fully charged, they were like messages from another world.

6. DON'T LOOK NOW

This once-seen-never-forgotten 1973 horror film by Nicolas Roeg follows a couple mourning their drowned daughter in Venice, a drowning city. The film became notorious because of a sex scene between the leads, rumoured to have been unsimulated, but what is actually remarkable about it is its kaleidoscopic quality: the footage is jumbled up, intercut with scenes showing the couple getting dressed to go out. This artistry makes it true to life: memories of sex are anarchic, not chronological.

7. MAUVAISE FOI

The films of Eric Rohmer are primarily about passion and desire, but expressed through conversations and voice-over, and even then, often with acute dishonesty. In La Collectionneuse, a man insists that a certain woman is not his type but is then seen, repeatedly and to great comic effect, to be pursuing her. We are all that man at some point in our lives.

8. A FRESHLY MADE VAGINA

Every year since 1993 the Literary Review has awarded a special prize: the Bad Sex in Fiction Award. The "winner" receives a piece of modern sculpture said to represent sexual intercourse in the 1950s. A couple of examples: "Sebastian's erect member was so big I mistook it for some sort of monument in the centre of a town." (Kathy Lette) "Her face gleamed with his jism in the spotty light of the motel room, there on the far end of East Beach, within sound of the sea." (John Updike).

9. DIAL-A-CLICHÉ

Now that we can text and FaceTime and Skype, have things become easier for lovers? Before mobile phones, he or she would wait for the other, worrying about whether to go and find a payphone to double-check the arrangement. We have graduated to "am here. where r u?", second only in originality to "I'm on the bus."

10. THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

Charlie Brooker's dystopian TV series Black Mirror is very preoccupied with the potential impact of technology on love and sexuality. In "Be Right Back", a woman whose lover has died is able to summon him back by accessing his digital "footprint"; in "Hang the DJ", a tyrannical Tinder-like app programmes relationships with an expiry date; most nightmarish is "The Entire History of You", in which everyone has been implanted with a digital "grain" that allows memories to be replayed entirely accurately. Total recall and complete transparency, without any of the blurring and retouching of memories that makes human relationships imperfect – and happiness possible.