The Sleuth takes Arctic Art to Taiwan—Part 1

Art Sleuth by Jean Bundy  Dec 5, 2018
I’m on a JAL flight out of Los Angeles, flying across the Pacific, heading to Taipei for the annual AICA-International (art critics) conference where I was invited to present a paper. Thinking about Captain Cook and his three three-year voyages mapping much of the Pacific Ocean, I felt privileged to be complaining about the many hours I would be seat-belted, watching movies and eating with chopsticks, without worry of scurvy. In honor of Cook, I decided to take along the book, ‘Captain Cook and the Pacific’, which begins by affirming that Cook’s voyages “represented maritime achievement and scientific progress on a global scale, bringing Enlightenment ideals to bear on the huge expanse of the Pacific (McAleer and Rigby 9).” Unlike my travels, Cook’s artists were experiencing vistas never seen by Europeans. I was venturing into well-examined waters, privileged to add my two cents to art history, beginning by reading my paper at a late 19th century Taiwan college, established under Japanese rule.

Taipei University of Education is located in downtown Taipei, a crowded smoggy city with motorized scooters, and friendly people, many of whom speak English. The campus of red brick classrooms and dorms snuggles up to expensive apartment complexes that sit next to tin roofed dwellings. On ground floors, fancy boutiques reside next to small vehicle repair garages. Autumn rains had subsided, but a light jacket was needed and holiday decorations were beginning to appear in malls with brands found anywhere: Polo, Hilfiger, Uniqlo. I found a yuppie eatery near the college that served scrambled egg sandwiches with apple, chicken and lettuce—a great combination. An energetic track meet carried on adjacent to the mini-museum and auditorium that became the conference base. For almost a week, art critics who write aesthetically, from Northern Europe to Australia, listened to talks about a desire for Globalism over Nationalism, and a healthier planet as contextualized in art. Sadly, there are countries where artists who visualize social injustice are censored, imprisoned or tortured. I had the privilege of explaining how much Arctic Arts is highlighting climate change as well as supporting indigenous subsistence Bush lifestyles, all couched into the conference theme, ways of using virtuality.

I gotta say: I thought reading ‘Arctic Environmental Challenges through Virtuality’ to well-established art folks was the scariest thing I’d ever done until I was clinging to my bedroom wall last Friday 8:30 am during the November 30th Anchorage earthquake, watching my pets flee, my art drop off walls and even Kant and Hegel textbooks crash onto the floor.

Here is a synopsis of my paper: Virtuality is an art critic’s visual/verbal research and communication tool when assessing climate change. Sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), who felt multifaceted simulacra was a ‘game with reality’ wrote, “the world is literally taken as it
is and ‘Disneyfied’ in other words is virtually sealed (Baudrillard 54).” While Baudrillard’s disenchantments with modernity contain truisms, the fact is we are forever stuck in an electronic world and might as well use it advantageously. Well, the bad guys have virtuality in their tool boxes too. Upon taking office, the Trump Administration deleted climate change data from their websites, rejecting all scientific opinions on Global Warming. They are now pouncing on the 1973 Endangered Species Act which in my Arctic neighborhood will have overarching consequences. (NYTimes, 1/20/17; 7/22/18). But, sometimes knowledge gained from smart devices does contribute to a cleaner environment. Recently, print and electronic media announced “Strawlessin Seattle,” a movement which prohibits restaurants from distributing plastic straws and utensils that contribute to killing marine life (Seattle Times, 9/8/17).

Virtuality in all its forms cooperates with reality as it helps to alert large numbers to serious issues, even if electronic equipment can’t solve every problem. In the Arctic, climate change is evident in all waterways, wildlife and vegetation. Viruality does have its ironies as melting is benefitting Point Hope, Alaska where high speed Internet cables have been embedded into Arctic sea beds, giving the tiny town of 700 access to the world through the passing digital linkage between London and Tokyo (NYTimes, 12/2/17).

Four artists working in the far North draw attention to the climate changing Arctic. The photograph, Subsistence, 2017, by artist Brian Adams (Iñupiaq), seeks humanity beneath surfaces as Adams explores age-old sustainability, store-bought versus harvesting of the wild, while maintaining harmony with an evolving environment. University of North Carolina, Charlotte, Marek Ranis wove satellite photos into woolen carpets. Viewers can better relate to escalating Arctic/Antarctic melt when shown reality on rugs, common household items. UCLA photographer Rebeca Méndez scrutinizes ever changing landscapes: windblown grass lands, crashing water falls, cracking Polar ice. She documented migratory patterns of Arctic Terns who travel in a figure-eight pattern 44,300 miles from pole to pole, yearly. Populations have diminished from insufficient catch/eat and oceanic trash strangulations, as warmer, acidic waters have drastically changed habitats. Further, visually explaining changes to the Tundra can be also understood in the recent Anchorage Museum show Murmur: Arctic Realities, 2018. John Grade built a faux Pingo (15’ x 38’x 42’) from recycled yellow cedar. Pingos are increasing, possibly due to gases from underground vegetable decomposition. Grade’s Sublime is not somewhere out there while you stand safely on a precipice; it becomes inescapable with its Global Warming messaging. Of note: in 1867, and 1883, Swedish navigator Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld explored Greenland, encountering early Arctic pollution. He was puzzled by black powder floating in water holes situated in the ice, which would later be identified as coal dust, a by-product of the Industrial Revolution (Hatfield 174-175).
Virtuality with all the electronic choices is a tool to implement change. It also takes a fearless art community, as art written, imaged, sculpted, or performed is a means to address social and political issues. Protesting, once relegated to street demonstrations and placards, explodes because of virtuality. Last summer’s soccer match interrupted by Pussy Riot went viral on social media (NYTimes, 7/15/18). French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) wrote on art’s relationship to social space before electronic simulacra; none the less he’s still relevant writing, “Nothing disappears completely, however; nor can what subsists be defined solely in terms of traces, memories or relics. In space, what came earlier continues to underpin what follows….What is the fantasy of art? To lead out of what is present, out of what is close, out of representations of space, into what is further off, into nature, into symbols, into representational spaces (Lefebvre 229- 232).” Virtuality has expanded the power of art, heightening social awareness; reality has been demoted, only if allowed. However, oversaturation of imagery is a downside of virtuality, leading to complacency.

Mini Sleuth: Next week, Part II, Art in Asia briefly

In Taipei and then returning to Anchorage through Tokyo, I walked miles through: Taipei’s National Palace Museum with major holdings transported in 1949 from Mainland China, Taipei Fine Arts Museum with their ecology-themed 2018 Biennial, Tokyo National Museum with its kimonos, and swords, Tokyo’s National Museum of Western Art exhibiting a Rubens retrospective, and the Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo across from the Emperor’s compound featuring Ingeard Roman’s Swedish designs and Awakenings, Art in Society in Asia 1960s-1990s, resembling American social realism—Asian styles independent and reflective of Euro-centricity.

Sources: Captain Cook and the Pacific, by John McAleer and Nigel Rigby; Conspiracy of Art by Jean Baudrillard; Lines in the Ice, Exploring the Roof of the World by Philip J. Hatfield all available on Amazon. Artists referenced can be Googled.


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