

A country of last whales — contemplating the horizon of global art history; or, can we ever really understand how big the world is?

Keynote Lecture for The Shape of Things, the symposium of 4th Auckland Triennial

22 May 2010

1) Let's begin with a fictional scene. An elderly couple, lying in bed, each reading a magazine. We catch them as they are just about to close the pages, turn off the lights and go to sleep. Ah, yes, the whale, she says. Do you ever think you'll be an avid reader of novels again? I'm not sure, he says. They put aside their magazines, kiss good night, and the old man and woman switch off their respective bedside lamps.

In his dream, the man — a now retired literature professor, who's written extensively on Melville's *Moby Dick* — dreams of the first time he saw a whale, as a young boy ... which then turns into an adventure story of some kind — the details are fuzzy, as often happens when one tries to articulate what happens in dreams — something about him flying or is he deep underwater? — yes, it must be underwater, swimming with whales — but how old is he? a young boy, still, or an old man, or his ideal self?

In real life, he was always very outdoorsy, but his fascination with the sea, and with nature at large, took a detour in his twenties, when he decided to study literature rather than nature, and join the university.

In her dream, the woman is transported back to the time when they first met. They met at school. She was doing her Phd in film studies, and he had just started teaching. She would sometimes go to his classes. In her dream, he is waving his hands in the air, just as he does when he pontificates in real life. He is saying: "the purpose, the true purpose of literature, of reading novels when you are young, is so that they can provide certain images of the world, of life, that will come back and haunt you, if you are so lucky to grow old."

Ah, yes, the whale.

I must confess, I've never seen a whale out in the wild. I'm not the outdoorsy type. And I'm no longer an avid reader of novels.

A few years ago, I read a wonderful book on the discovery of dinosaurs in England: about Gideon

Mantell, the country doctor and amateur dinosaur hunter, and Richard Owen, the professional scientist, who gave us the name, dinosaur. Shortly after, I read a very lively biography of Karl Marx. It struck me — Marx and dinosaurs are contemporaries. Dinosaurs are as much of the 19th century and as are of the time before history. It was through discovering dinosaurs that Europe finally let go of its biblical conception of the world as being only several thousand years old, to the more expanded view of being older than hundreds of millions of years. Dinosaurs, as WJT Mitchell has suggested in his *The Last Dinosaur Book* — where he indeed discusses dinosaurs and Marx in the same breath — are totem animals of modernity.

I wish I had gone to the Museum of Natural History when I was a teenager visiting New York, back in the day, instead of going to the Museum of Modern Art. Maybe then I would have ended up studying dinosaurs instead of art.

Like many children, I was fascinated by dinosaurs. I'm sure it had a lot to do with them being very big. That has developed into a life-long fascination with big things. I'm especially fascinated by big things that are not made by humans. A big city, like New York, is doubtless very exciting and awe-inspiring. But there's something radically different about a big mountain, or a great view of the sea, or a big tree ... The natural sublime interrupts "our" world profoundly — it is of another scale.

I'm hardly a tree person, but I'd like to think that an important quality of life measure would be the amount of time spent in the company of big trees.

"Nature", it's been the subject matter of art for a long time. I have to catch myself here, and remember: to naturalise is to mythologise. Today, we continue to mythologise nature in many varied ways. Although in my own encounters with contemporary culture, the big myths and themes in art that I find, these are very often the big things of the human world. Globalisation. Capitalism. Spectacle. Art's own complicity and resistance to all these things.

I hope I'm not disappointing anyone today, but I'm not going to say very much about whales. Not really. I've been reading a book by Philip Hoare: *Leviathan, or, The Whale*. Hoare tells of his fascination with these creatures, from his childhood visits to London's Natural History Museum, to his adult encounters with them in the seas. He talks about the history of whales and whaling, going back and forth between human history and natural history. The book is filled with all sorts of interesting, amazing facts, and some very powerful images of the human-whale story. And of course he talks a lot about Herman Melville's great book, *Moby Dick*, which was published in 1851.

In the 19th century, cities like London were light up at night, fueled by whale oil. Indeed, as I started reading Hoare's book, I was hitting myself on the side of the head — how stupid it was of me to neglect to think of whales. How odd that I would be fascinated by dinosaurs, and let them shape my thinking of time, human history, and so on, but neglect to recognise the whale. It's so interesting how the 19th century was marked by these two great families of large, mysterious creatures — one profoundly ancient, and one still with us, but being mercilessly hunted to extinction. The hunt for whales took Europeans almost all the way north and south, as whales are animals that truly live of the world — individuals roam it not quite in its entirety, but perhaps more so than any other creature, even the great migrating birds.

There's so much to say about the extinction of whales, so much that is important, far more important ... but that's beyond the scope of what I can speak of here today.

Rather, the image of the whale that I'm able to offer here is of that thing which inspires literature. And I'm not just talking about a great novel, like *Moby Dick*. I'm concerned with the relation that literature has to the world. Something so large as the world, so large as a whale.

What can fiction tell us about art criticism? I'm interested in how, often, novels are written in the first person, but even otherwise, reading a novel is about contact with an interior life. I'd like to offer the image here of literature as a model for artwriting; it is a way of handling something so enormous, like the world, or the whale, but remaining intimate in scale.

Today, my presentation concerns size, first, and then shape — the bigness of the world. And the smallness of human interventions. Or perhaps I should say the modesty of human interventions. It seems we can easily do a lot of damage, with long-lasting consequences, but too often it seems that our corrections are late and little in comparison.

But, yes, the bigness of the world. Size before shape; rather, size is shape. Our efforts to grasp the shape of things has very much to do with the fact that things are so large, so beyond our capacities to grasp them. And yet we are those creatures who have defined ourselves by our acts of grasping. We are the animal with the hand, the opposable thumb.

Today, I'd like to offer a few images, like the image of a country of last whales, and speak to these images. (To stay with the grasping metaphor, may I suggest that speaking tu, with the accent on the

preposition “to”, of moving towards, is a form of grasping.)

I'd like to say my title, “a country of last whales”, came to me in a dream, perhaps a dream like the those of our elderly academic couple, but that's not quite true. Though it's not entirely false either.

I will also cite some texts, on the themes of global art history, and will attempt to speak to these texts.

Lastly, perhaps at cross purposes, accompanying the text, though not so much illustrating any points that I am trying to make but rather complementing the spirit of the entire argument, is a series of images ... the secret lives of wood, another country in our midst that we overlook.

Together Again (Wood: Cut) PART II was presented at The Substation, where I used to work; it was the second part of an ongoing inquiry into the “secret lives” of rainforest products — of “wood”. Wood explored as material, metaphor, magic, ecological resource and historical agent.

In this project, the memories inscribed in the grain of a tropical hardwood bed found in Singapore are conjured in still- and animated images made of paper puppets, wood-prints, collage and charcoal. The starting point was a teak bed purchased from a second-hand wood furniture collector in the Little India neighbourhood. This bed, estimated to be from the 1940s, was brought home and planted in the garden of the artist.

Much of the artworks in the exhibition were made of prints from this bed and other wood furniture and domestic objects found in the Little India neighbourhood. Instead of cutting into the wood in the manner of a conventional woodcut, the works on display were constructed from simple unadorned prints of pieces of furniture. These prints are then cut-up and combined to conjure projected imaginings of the memories of the bed, and by extension the memories of the wood and trees from the region.

What I'll show are the videos from the exhibition: animated images made of paper puppets, wood-prints, collage and charcoal. Protagonists include William Farquhar, the first British Resident and Commandant of Singapore, and the nineteenth-century natural historian, Alfred Russell Wallace, as well as wood-print reproductions from *The William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings*, and renditions of flora and fauna from *The Malay Archipelago*, the seminal account of Wallace's journeys through Southeast Asia.

2) The origin of culture is nature as metaphor. Perhaps. If one could speak of “origins”. The proposition here is that culture started when we began to make metaphors. And of course the first metaphors we could resort to would have been nature as metaphor. But, of course, theory tells us that to search for that ordinary moment is a delusion. And that to grasp at the real thing behind the metaphor is also futile; or rather, like all forms of desiring, there is a very complicated relationship between desire and the object of desire. Between metaphor and the reference of metaphor.

To return to my title, “a country of last whales”. So, if origins are problematic, what then of “lasts”?

Again, extinction is something that haunts what I have to say today, not only the extinctions of dinosaurs, of whales, and all other living fauna and flora. But also of humans, of our culture and history. The end of capitalism. Its last hurrah. But I cannot address those things, not directly, not on this occasion.

If not those things, then what of the decline of literature, of reading. Who reads art criticism anymore? Today, there is more and more art; more biennales, more art fairs. There is even more art writing. Reviews, catalogue essays, art books of all shapes and sizes. And yet we do talk about the decline of reading, the decline of university departments of literatures. Perhaps art history departments around the world are in better health than literature departments. But I think the indicator for the future of good art criticism is better gauged by looking at the study of literature than the study of art. As long as there is art, there will be a lot of art writing. But what will its purpose be? Will it connect us with the world deeply and intimately?

Perhaps the most underestimated word in my title is also the most important: country. It’s an under-used metaphor for that which is different, as in: the past is another country.

I live and work in Singapore. Right next door, Malaysia, is where I was born, and where my retired parents now live. Today, when I go to Malaysia, which is so near to Singapore, and so similar, with so much shared history and culture, yet because it’s another country, it’s so very different.

The word “country” is much looser than “nation”. We can speak of countries within a nation, perhaps even a small country in one corner of the city. The word is a marker of place, but perhaps more importantly than marking what is the same within the borders of a country, the word is far more interesting when we speak of another country, when we think of going to that other country.

3) A republic of readers. So, is reading in decline? Discussions of decline — of painting, jazz, this or that — often belie a nostalgia for something that never was. Was there ever an ideal reading public?

It's useful to shift discussions of the public away from the notion that it comprises various groups of people to the idea of it as a space. The "public" is not, as it is all too often conjured, the manufactured consent of the masses — whether enunciated by the government, or expressed in surveys and market research. Rather, what should be emphasized is how, crucially, the public regularly speaks in terms of individual voices, speaking in spaces known, generically, as the public sphere, or in specific public institutions.

If I may share two examples from my own experiences with The Substation arts center in Singapore: firstly, the annual conferences of the 1990s, and, secondly, the attempts to organize the Street Party in 2006, and the Tunnel Party a year later.

"Art vs. Art," the inaugural conference held in 1993, was a landmark occasion. In the 1990s, contemporary art felt "new" in Singapore. Not only were visual artists experimenting with practices such as performance art and installation (alongside comparable explorations in theater), but these experiments coincided with the opening up of civil society. "Art vs. Art" brought together local audiences, academics, activists, and all manner of arts professionals — from actors to administrators, painters to playwrights — who came to discuss art in terms hitherto unexamined in public. It was followed by other conferences, on art spaces, multiculturalism, theatre in Singapore. By the end of the decade, however, The Substation stopped holding these forums. It's arguable that it was less an issue of funding, than a realization that the sense of urgency, which made the first few so significant, had dissipated. People in the arts seemed to have lost the desire to gather at public institutions like The Substation and hash out arguments and positions. What changed? Did talking about art lose its novelty? Or was it that such talk became more commonplace, and that The Substation conference, by no longer being something rare, no longer seemed as relevant?

In 2002, The Substation's founder, Kuo Pao Kun, passed away. For his memorial, we closed down the street in front of the building. Then in 2006, we attempted to close down Armenian Street again. We planned to build a stage for live music, and fill the street with makeshift booths for arts and civil society groups. Each group would have a table or two, where they could display their posters, flyers, publications, and so on, showcasing their past and present activities. The event was scheduled to begin in the afternoon and end after midnight. The hope was to bring the whole community together in public, which never happens. The Street Party was conceived in benign terms: no speeches, no

advocacy, just the wish to momentarily take over the street in front of The Substation. If this could be accomplished, it would set a precedent for arts and civil society groups gathering in “public.” It was scheduled for September, when the first Singapore biennale had opened, but more importantly, when the IMF and World Bank held their annual meetings in Singapore, when the government was in high security mode, restricting all outdoor demonstrations.

But our event was to happen well after the Bank meetings concluded. In our negotiations with the police and authorities, we conceded that we would not organize our “flea market” of arts and civil society groups outdoors, but would hold it within our premises. We still requested to close down the street for the evening’s party. In the end, we were denied even that, and cancelled the event.

The next year, without any IMF and World Bank meetings looming, we attempted another outside event. This time, we didn’t ask to close down anything, but approached our neighbor, the Singapore Management University, and requested to use their paved walkway next to the Fort Canning Tunnel. SMU was more than happy to oblige. We called the event, the Tunnel Party. Again, the authorities denied us permission to have booths of arts and civil society groups in the area. Only a regular commercial flea market was allowed, as well as live music. We continued with the Tunnel Party, nonetheless, because we saw the compromised event as a work-in-progress — it offered a basis to imagine what could have been, and what could be in the future. Naturally, we were all terribly disappointed, albeit not too surprised, that even for the Tunnel Party we couldn’t have the arts and civil society component. But perhaps the biggest disappointment was that during the event itself, only a small fraction of the members from those groups showed up. No longer formally included, many no longer felt ownership of the event, or, more importantly, the need to support the “cause” of claiming public space.

From these local anecdotes, I’d like to shift to a more regional and historical purview, and consider three moments indicative of larger discursive currents: the first anxiously reflects on the rise of China; the second laments the state of art writing in Singapore; and the third observes problems with art conferences. In 2008, the journal Ctrl+P produced a special issue entitled, “And Now China?” The editors, Judy Freya Sibayan and Erika Tan, approached several artists, curators, and writers, myself among them, with a question, from which the following is excerpted: “In light of China-as-hegemonic force, it has become crucial to uphold the idea of the production of culture as a site of struggle over power and meaning ... Oppositional-meaning making is now the lot and responsibility of perhaps a fatal space of those who continue to be consigned to the margins.... while no new epistemic change has occurred, independent voices are much more difficult to sustain with China on

everyone's horizon.... Who will now speak from the margins when margins and centers are already a too-appropriated site?" The phrase, "no new epistemic change has occurred," may appear as descriptive of the status quo, yet it belies a rhetoric of foreclosure: no new epistemic change is foreseeable in the near future. This concedes too much. Yes, there are problems. For starters, we lack critical density in our discourses. More important than the debates that have as its agonists, a tired West and a rising Asia/China, are the conversations we in the region are not having amongst ourselves. It is density in these inter-Asia discourses that we need most. If we must allow ourselves some release from the inordinate burdens of representation, still, we have to confront another responsibility: to theorize the horizon of an epistemic shift when we eventually do acquire discursive density.

Occasionally, when lecturing on art, I mention that the core of my education comes from conversations with artists (it's not so much because they are the best sources of information about their work; rather, talking with artists is a good test for the relevance of one's writing). But the ratio of private to public conversations about Singapore art remains too heavily skewed in favor of the former, which is frequently lost to history as it's undocumented. To return for a moment to The Substation annual conference: perhaps its demise was emblematic of the halting development of discourse here. When speaking in public, we've attained a certain competence, but we don't know how to get to the next level, to build on what has been previously written or said. To wit: at the end of the 2006 "Comparative Contemporaries" symposium and workshops, a friend — in a private dinner conversation, no less — observed how those of us in the region cannot seem to talk in-depth when we talk in public. He noted that there is only the superficial presentation and re-presentation of diverse themes and issues. Collectively, we never get into detail; we never focus on one thing.

What explains this chronic avoidance of delving deeper in discussion? To continue with the usual complaints about the underdevelopment of discourse in Singapore — the lack of material support for publications, the failure of institutions like the universities, museums and art schools to produce substantial research on art as the rule rather than the exception, the disinterest from the mainstream media, the pervasive culture of anti-intellectualism — all this adds to a more detailed description of the situation, but it is still not enough for an explanation.

This lack of discursive density in Singapore and Southeast Asia is not peculiar to the region. In some ways, it represents the situation everywhere else than Europe and the US.

4) Addressing the global. In the introduction to *Is Art History Global?*, James Elkins, asks: "What is

the shape, or what are the shapes, of art history across the world? Is it becoming global — that is, does it have a recognisable form wherever it is practiced? Can the methods, concepts and purposes of Western art history be suitable for art outside of Europe and North America? And if not, are there alternatives that are compatible with existing modes of art history?”

Elkins then goes on to describe a modest task for his introduction. The book itself is ambitious; it is his introduction that is modest, because it only means to initiate discussion, rather than provide answers. He offers five reasons for thinking art history might be considered to comprise several irreconcilable practices, and another five for thinking it can be considered: “as a single, fairly cohesive enterprise — not one that is homogeneous certainly, and not one that is distributed evenly around the world, but a field that shares some basic concepts and premises.” In the first case, art history would not be global because it would be several enterprises that merely happen to share a name. While in the second, what is shared is a “rigorously defined set of assumptions and protocols.”

Elkins goes on to insist on the distinction between criticism and history. There are university art history departments. There are no departments of art criticism. History is defined by its objects of study, its canons, its institutions and disciplines. More than any of the above, “it is the methods of art history, and not its subject matter, that effectively unify the field”. Following from this, he argues that: “Art history depends on *Western* conceptual schema”.

To sum up, Elkins offers his own position on the question, is art history global? — Yes, it is. Or at least it's *becoming* a global enterprise.

My own answer to the question, Is art history becoming global?, is No. I'd say that it appears to be global, because we are looking at the question already from a global perspective.

Note that Elkins's question turns on the word “recognise” — does art history have a recognisable form wherever it is practiced. We recognise what we know. Or often, we project onto things what we know, and recognise them because we see them in certain ways.

What I'd like to proffer is a strategic disavowal of the global. There are perspectives that seek to interrupt the global gaze.

When Elkins asks if art history around the world is a cohesive enterprise, he makes equivalent cohesiveness with the global. The global perspective sees the world as a whole. But if what's at stake

is intelligibility, well, then does that still require a single, unified vantage point?

Art history around the world shares a name, but does it also share a set of references and methods? Does an intensification of sharing around the world necessarily entail or require a global perspective? Don't we sometimes share because of proximity: if A shares with B and with shares with C, then the sharing can get widely distributed. Becomes ubiquitous. But does it mean that A has contact with C, that A can assume to share with C? Sometimes not. I'd like to put some tension between the concept of sharing and the assumption of the global. The intensification of sharing does NOT always mean the intensification of globalisation.

We speak of globalisation as a process, when it's helpful to think of it as a perspective. Sanjay Krishnan in his book *Reading the Global*, argues that "the 'term 'global' describes a way of bringing into view the world as a single, unified entity, articulated in space and developing over (common) time'."

When Elkins argues that it is method that unifies the field of art history more than content, I'd also like to disagree, somewhat. Because method is always tested in contexts. To share a method is to reshape it in new contexts. Again the key word here is sharing. To share is not necessarily to bring everything together into a single, unified perspective. Sharing also allows for distances in between.

I think one of the most interesting things that Elkins says in his introduction is the note that he ends with: the idea that becoming global creates an obligation — to read widely and continuously. I'd like to pick up on that. I do agree that we find ourselves in a world with an increasing sense of obligation. An obligation to read widely. An obligation to share.

5) Excess, Access, Axis of History. In a recent issue of the art theory journal *October* (130), the editors initiated a questionnaire:

"The category of 'contemporary art' is not a new one. What is new is the sense that, in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment.... At the same time, perhaps paradoxically, 'contemporary art' has become an institutional object in its own right: in the academic world there are professorships and programs, and in the museum world departments and institutions, all devoted to the subject ...

“Is this floating-free real or imagined?... A simple effect of the end-of-grand-narratives? If it is real, how can we specify some of its principal causes ... beyond general reference to “the market” and “globalization”? Or is it indeed a direct outcome of a neoliberal economy, one that, moreover, is now in crisis? What are some of its salient consequences ... Are there instructive analogies to be drawn from the situation in other arts and disciplines? Finally, are there benefits to this apparent lightness of being?

The respondents, a large group with diverse backgrounds and interests, included persons like Elkins, Okwui Enwezor, Grant Kester, Michelle Kuo, Miwon Kwon and Pamela Lee. In a footnote, the editors said they had approached about seventy art critics, historians and curators. Here’s the shocker: they only approached persons based in Europe and the U.S. Because they felt that the questions, as formulated, were “specific to these regions”. Really? Most respondents talked about the global nature of contemporary art.

Was *October* being ironic? Were they inadvertently provincialising Europe and the US. (There’s that book by Dipesh Chakrabarty — *Provincialising Europe*.)

Rather than dwell on *October*, let me turn instead to the *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Art*, and its special issue, “21st-Century Art History”, edited by Rex Butler and Robert Leonard.

In their introduction to the special issue, which pursues many of the questions put forth by Elkins in *Is Art History Global?*, Rex and Robert cite Slavoj Žižek, and his discussion of the *end* of history. And in a very Žižekian move, they turn it around and instead talk about the *excess* of history. Rather than any “end”, what obtains today is that there are a whole lot of art histories.

Europe invented multiculturalism, but it’s come back to bite it in the ass. “In terms of the great ‘provincialism problem’ that seems to characterise the art of regional cultures, the real point is that *everywhere* is regional”, including Europe.

Interestingly, however, Rex and Leonard still frame the question of universalism in terms of there needing “to be some position outside of the world” to stand in for the universal perspective. Their answer is that this outside is *nowhere*. I’m not so sure. Perhaps it is also *everywhere* as well. Though that is not quite right; a Žižekian reversal misses the point.

6) How to speak to a big world? Does universalism depend on a single outside global perspective? A perspective that sees the world as a single, global entity? Or is it through relentless, ubiquitous sharing that we become universally connected, even if there is no single thread that connects us all the way through.

Wittgenstein, in explaining how we learn to use words, argues that we do not learn the definition of a word by grasping its essence, so much as becoming acquainted with a family of resemblances. Chair A looks like chair B, and B kind of shares some qualities with C. But A and C are very different. We do not need to apply the same idea to all chairs, we just need to find the various short-term connections that ultimately bring them together as a family.

Huw Hallam, a contributor to the special journal issue, in his essay takes us from Hegel to cosmopolitanism. He rehearses some of the criticisms of Hegel's aesthetic theory: it's teleological and idealist — the end of history is a given; it's Eurocentric, and projects its provincialism as the universal standard, and so on. Huw then goes on to advocate for cosmopolitanism, and defends it against the suspicion that cosmopolitanism is colonialism in new clothes. It leads not towards "a singular ever-expanding yet concentric cosmopolitanism but to multiple overlapping polycentric cosmopolitanisms".

Elsewhere in the issue, Sydney's John Clark facilitates a roundtable with some perspectives from Asia, from Patrick Flores of Manila to Parul Dave Mukherjee of New Delhi. Omuka Toshiharu, from Tokyo, raised this question: "I remember an art critic once said that the jury members of some biennale or other selected art works according to their 'quality'. What is that quality that works universally?"

I'd like to close my presentation today with a very tentative response to that question. A large part of an art critic's job is to nominate good works of art. We write because we want to *share* what we believe is good. These good works may not be universally agreed upon, but I think they can be pretty contagious. If I get a chance to share with you my thinkings and feelings about an artwork that I believe in, there's a chance you may share these feelings too.

I like to tell my students that one of the worst things, if you are an artist, is when everybody hates your work. Even your mother. But perhaps even worse, is when everybody loves you. The best thing is when there are disagreements; some people like your work, while some dislike it. When it comes to art, the most interesting disagreements are possibly those amongst friends: persons who have much

in common, but nonetheless have differences. Then, the disagreements are based on shared sympathies, and the debates can be nuanced; the criticisms, critiques.

In thinking about how to speak to a big world, the notion of friendship is helpful. One can make friends with almost anyone. It doesn't matter if you come from disparate backgrounds; what matters is that you eventually share something. One can have friends from across the whole, wide world. But the thing about friendship — even in the age of facebook — is that it still matters what and how and why we share, and you can't simply “friend” everyone.