

Margins About European Art at Jusshi School

The three apes on the supraporta of the stable of the heavenly horses at the Nikko temple district had a long journey behind them before arriving where they are found today – instigated by African seamen who carried apes on their boats for the detection of poison in food and water supplies, used by Indian Buddhists as metaphorical guardians on altarpieces, given an exotic flavour of lust and virility in Central Asian red light districts, depicted by Italian and Flemish painters as symbols of power beyond humanity as echoed in speech and senses, and finally donated by Dutch merchants to the Shogun of Edo on the occasion of the erection of the temple district. Thus they resemble the migration of metaphors and iconography on a global scheme long before 'Globalization' was the hype of economists.

Seeing the three apes while visiting the Nikko temples on a free day from our symposium at Jusshi School in Tokyo turned another key of understanding the situation of a European artist/scientist when being in Japan. As a true matter of fact, everyone trained in looking at European art considers these three figures as conventional – to put it mildly – and far too colourful to be taken seriously as a piece of art. It is their resemblance of exotism and animal behaviour which is important just at the place where they are, and this importance has risen since the re-occupation of this temple area by global tourism to which I clearly belonged when visiting the site. My attempts to take a photograph of them were halted by sheer masses of people and especially by the school classes meeting just opposite this building for being photographed themselves.

There was another animal I came across in this week, and with a similar metaphorical strain it cleared my view on my own role at Jusshi School. Walking around the Engakuji temple area in Kamakura on the other of the two holidays I had in Japan, I ran into the glass display of the temple's presents and belongings. In one corner there was a dark brown barking deer, and a small sign displayed that this stuffed animal had been donated by the German emperor around 1900. Knowing that there are deers in Japan I immediately understood that this animal figure was presented as a sign of European bigness and power – amusingly miniaturated by the display in the farthest corner of the tiny building remote in the temple gardens.

At my first visit to Jusshi School I felt a certain discomfort in defining my role as a scientist accompanying a group of Dutch and German artists/musicians whose line-up was broadened by people from Mexico, the United States, and other countries. Participating in an experience derived from what I went through as an integral part of Het Apollohuis, I saw myself in a position aside from anything happening in the rooms, installations, and concerts there. So I started questioning the quality of the house and its offerings to the event going on in there – with some astonishing results. Having seen thousands of Japanese schoolkids on their way to and from school in Tokyo, and recognising their openness to anything happening aside the roads they were running in, I started learning about art as a schoolboy, too. Of course, this was the proposition of a game, and not a really new one, but I was content having found my key to a door of globalization in art.

Some of the works functioned with the schoolhouse, some did not – no new experience, either. The symposium I was asked to participate in was as polite as non-referential in its views on art, society, and town planning. Luckily enough, some of the individual talks proved fruitful for further investigation, and the big relief came from the fact that our foolish Rem-Koolhaas-feeling of bigness and un-planning-ness was shared with the same hilarious irony by all participants, maybe except the politicians in the room. Rethinking the discussions we, and in this case I, had had I cannot help but consider them as a part of a global discourse on grammar without having a common language. Returning to the works the next morning I found that this was exactly the case with any of them either. As obviously displaced as they were they could not help but ask for exile, for the shelter of understanding which is the true role of a school building. So Jusshi School maybe named the first asylum of the arts in Tokyo so far.

Writing these lines roughly two years later, I start glorifying my experiences – this is normal as our brain is an asylum of reminded happinesses. Any school building changes its scale in memory: Returning to it each one of us considers it a lot smaller than it should have been when one was a youngster and student there. So, there is no established judgement on the works at Jusshi School surviving in my memory, except for those works I had known before and after, there is no statement to make besides the emotional reaction on tiny bits and pieces of recollections in my brain, and there is no song to sing except the praise of a very deep impression made on a European chap that had travelled along similar traces as the three apes in Nikko. In animal sounds and behaviour, I rather stick to them than to the barking deer at Kamakura – this strong voice is reserved to the praise of those who made all these things happen!

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