



COUNTLESS (UNTOLD) STORIES

RASHEED ARAEEN IN CONVERSATION WITH JENS HOFFMANN

In a distinctive career spanning more than five decades, the Pakistani-born, Britain-based artist, writer, publisher, and occasional curator Rasheed Araeen has like no other practitioner radically questioned the art world's fixation on Western-dominated artistic histories and discourses. His outspoken critique of power structures and hierarchies, as well as the inherent racism in the art world and the exclusion of large parts of the non-Western art world from general discourse, have made him one of the most essential and provocative voices in the arts.



Sculpture No 2, 1965. Courtesy: Aicon Gallery, New York

In this conversation, Araeen speaks about his early fascination with the work of Anthony Caro, his thoughts on and involvement with Minimalism, his skepticism toward postcolonial theory, his seminal journal *Third Text*, his groundbreaking 1989 exhibition *The Other Story*, and his latest endeavor, the book *The Whole Story Art in Postwar Britain*, a reassessment of British art history from a non-Western perspective. Accompanying this conversation is a partial reprint of the first issue of the seminal journal *Black Phoenix*, which was founded in 1978 and copublished and coedited by Araeen and Mahmood Jamal, an Urdu poet, artist, and theorist. *Black Phoenix* aimed at offering a space for modes of thought that contended with Western forms of cultural hegemony. It paved the way toward a more nuanced understanding of race in Britain.



From left to right - *Triangles*, 1970; *Discosailing*, 1970/1973-2003; *Chakras (16 discs in the water of St. Katherine Docks, London)*, 1969-1970. Rasheed Araeen: *Before and After Minimalism* installation view at Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, 2014. Courtesy: Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah



Background, from left to right - *Neela*, 1970; *Lal Kona*, 1968; *Shurbati*, 1973-2013. Foreground - *Sculpture No 1 (blue)*, 1965-2014; *Chaar Yaar I (four friends)*, 1968. Rasheed Araeen: *Before and After Minimalism* installation view at Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, 2014. Courtesy: Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah

JENS HOFFMANN

You were born in Punjab in 1935 and moved with your family to Karachi about a decade later. How and when were you exposed to art for the first time, and which artists in Pakistan played a role in your early thinking about art?

RASHEED ARAEEN

I was born right at the time when my father left his poverty-ridden village in northeast Punjab and came to Karachi in search of a job. He then took the family to Sonmiani in Balochistan, a beautiful seaside town surrounded by dry and arid landscape about eighty kilometers from Karachi, where I spent half of my childhood; the other half in the green fields of Punjab. I mention this because my traveling between the dry and arid landscape of Baluchistan and the green fields of Punjab, which also had different languages and cultures, was fundamental to the development of my aesthetic sensibility.

My mother played a fundamental role in this respect too, as she often asked me, even when I was seven or eight years old, to draw flowers for her embroidery work. In 1945, my family moved to Karachi, and I was admitted to the school of Sind Madressah, where my drawing teacher noticed my special ability and encouraged me in this respect. I began to draw anything I found interesting, but without realizing yet that it would lead me to art. My first encounter with art took place in 1950, when I saw the show of S. M. Sultan, a watercolor landscape artist from eastern Pakistan (now Bangladesh). My own interest in art began after I joined the Sketch Club of United States Information Centre in 1952.

JH

In 1964 you moved to London. What did you hope to find there, and what kind of political and cultural atmosphere did you encounter in the UK in the mid-1960s? Did you expect to find the harsh racism that you and many other immigrants were exposed to one you got there?

RA

Before I arrived in London in 1964 I did not know anything about art in Britain, nor did I think then that there would be racism in the British art world. However, what I did encounter first was not this racism but only the everyday life of London. At that time there was no law against overt and open racism, but it did not bother me much because I believed that the art world would be free from it, and I kept myself occupied with what brought me to London.

JH

I know that seeing the work of Anthony Caro in London was a formative experience for you. Like you, he had a background in engineering, which perhaps explains your fascination with him to a certain degree. When did you encounter his work for the first time?

RA

I do not now remember exactly, but I have a piece of paper that was used as a spread on a small table in my apartment between November 1964 and July 1965, on which I occasionally scribbled while taking my coffee in the morning, and among the scribbles are a small drawing of a steel structure, somewhat an idea of a sculpture, which shows that I was aware of Caro's work. As you say, Caro had an overwhelming impact on my thinking about sculpture, which in fact led me into the idea of arranging steel girders symmetrically at the end of 1965. As you know I was trained as a civil engineer before he took up art so it was close to my thinking.

JH

Did you see *The New Generation: 1965* at Whitechapel Art Gallery, which was somewhat an homage to Caro and included work by British sculptors such as David Annesley, Phillip King, Tim Scott, William Tucker, and Isaac Witkin?

RA

Yes, I did. It was great, and it opened the way for me. However, my fascination with Caro's work remained central to my interest in sculpture, perhaps because of his use of steel structures from engineering.

JH

Recently you are often referred to as a pioneer of Minimalism, a term coined in North America to describe a wide range of artworks deriving from the more reductive aspects of modernism, for example Joseph Albers, Piet Mondrian, or Kazimir Malevich. The art historian James Meyer views Minimalism in his book *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (2001) in an almost nationalistic fashion,

as an American movement spearheaded by Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, Anne Truitt, and Sol LeWitt. How do you feel about your early work now being grouped with Minimalism while having been excluded from that particular artistic canon for decades, in an incredible kind of institutional ignorance?

RA

A number of factors underlie James Meyer's discourse, and those of others who promote New York Minimalism as an exclusively American phenomenon. I'm not the only or the first one to point to the postwar nationalism and chauvinism of the New York art world, which was trapped in the delusion of America's imperial power, and which then blocked the minds of its intellectuals. They could not see anything worthwhile beyond or outside America. As for my own work, I was not in pursuit of Minimalism. It came out of my fascination with and response to Caro's modernism, which carried within it the historical inheritance of the artists you have mentioned. However, what triggered my imagination upon seeing Caro's work was not just its geometry—my interest in geometry was already there, formed during my engineering studies, which later became part of the abstract artworks I did in Karachi between 1958 and 1964. Once a particular type of knowledge becomes international, as it did in the postwar period, it is not unusual for ideas to emerge as a response to this knowledge wherever this knowledge has reached. This phenomenon of the emergence of new ideas simultaneously beyond particular national or cultural boundaries is recognized in science. Why should this not happen in art as well? It is true that "Minimalism" as a term was coined in New York in relation to the work of the New York artists who began making sculpture by using equal-size components for it and putting them together symmetrically. But this way of making sculpture couldn't be confined exclusively to one part of the international art world. And if this kind of sculpture did in fact emerge in London as well, for example, why was it not recognized?

The answer of course lies in the postwar American domination of the international art world, in pursuit of its cultural imperialism, and when it reached Britain it became part of its institutional racism. Even the flagship institution of Tate, whose job is to promote true knowledge of art, continued for forty years promoting the idea that there was no Minimalism in Britain, and it refused to accept my work as what historically emerged within a movement of mainstream modernism. Only in 2007 did Tate recognize the fact that I was "a pioneer of Minimalism," mainly due to changing cultural policies of the British state. You ask me how I feel now, when ultimately my work has been recognized for what it deserved forty years ago. I do not know how to answer this question, because the institutional ignorance that you mention in fact deprived me of my professional career, which was my basic human right: to earn my living by what I did as work. The indifference, if not the outright hostility, of the London art world forced me to do other things to survive. But despite all this it did not prevent me from continuing in thinking and doing art.

JH

How would you define Minimalism if anything other than a North American-dominated style or movement?

RA

I cannot define Minimalism, because I don't need to. The definition of Minimalism is the job of art history; only art history and what underpins and legitimizes its narratives can define it. Modernism is still dominated by Eurocentric art history, and without its liberation from this history we cannot define Minimalism in any other way than what is prevailing.

JH

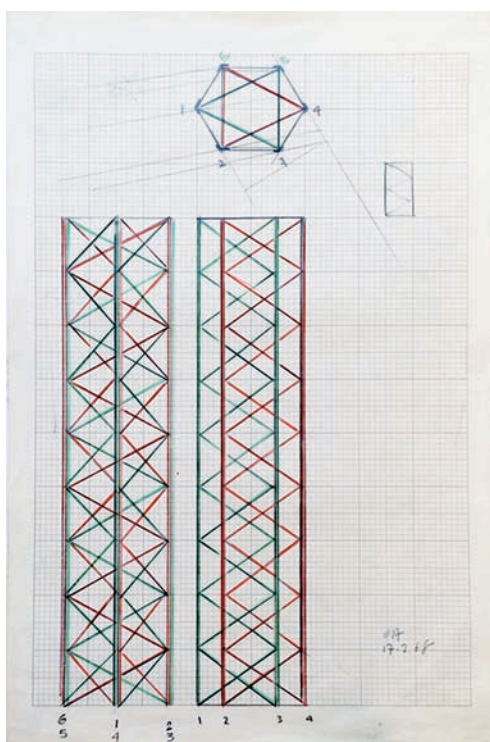
One other way of thinking about Minimalism is to look at it as a value system in which simplicity is understood as necessary for a perhaps more spiritual or essential mode of life, as many Asian artists did. Mono-ha is a key example. I do not connect that to your work at all, but thought it worth mentioning to get yet another take on it. I understand your take on Minimalism as a representation and symbol of a static, hierarchical ideological system that you tried to challenge and dismantle. Is that correct?

RA

Yes, I think this is right, but my understanding of Minimalism was also fueled by the idea that it was a historical shift from

arranging things asymmetrically, perhaps symbolizing hierarchy (as some American critics have asserted), to treating things equally and placing them together symmetrically. This may offer an idea for organizing a social system in which things are treated equally and are put together symmetrically. I am not aware of Asian artists' views in this respect, but I'm not interested in what you call a "spiritual or essential mode of life." My interest has always been in aesthetics and its formulation in art, whose value lies within itself, not connected to the spiritual. Did I try to challenge and dismantle "a static, hierarchical ideological system"? Yes, but not consciously. I just wanted to do things differently and originally, without already formed or determined ideas or definitions.

JH When did you become aware of other non-Western art movements such as Brazilian's Neo-Concretism, which similarly employed the language of Minimalism to political and social ends? Another example, among many others, would be the Venezuelan artist Jesús Rafael Soto, who came from a more Op art direction. Did that play any part in your thinking?



Original Drawing for Sculpture (6), 1965-1968.
Courtesy: Aicon Gallery, New York

RA In the autumn of 1965, I was attending evening pottery classes and became friendly with an English girl. Unfortunately I have forgotten her name, but I remember that she was married to an Italian avant-garde artist in Milan. She had much more knowledge of the avant-garde than I did, and she took me to Signals, a gallery run by Paul Keeler and David Medalla, to see the work of Soto, which was overpowering. I did not know about this gallery before, and it was through the gallery's publication, also called *Signals*, that I became aware of the work of Latin American artists such as the Brazilians Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica.

JH Why was *Biostructural Play*, conceived in 1968 for an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, not realized until 2004 when you titled it *Zero to Infinity*?

RA *Zero to Infinity* needed enormous resources, material and intellectual, and without support from an art institution like the ICA, I could not realize it. And as I faced constant indifference, as well as hostility, from the British art world, it not only became impossible to realize this work, but I had to abandon (a sort of tactical postponement) all the projects I then had. Despite all this, I must say that there were some individuals who supported and tried to promote my work. At the end of the 1990s I met Vivien Ashley, who became very interested in this work. She was involved in F-EST, an art festival in East London, and wanted *Zero to Infinity* to be part of it. After some efforts she managed to raise some funds and persuaded

198 Gallery to stage the work. It was entirely due to the efforts of Vivien Ashley that this work was realized in 2004. It was after my meeting with her that I wrote a text for it and retitled it as *Zero to Infinity*.

JH Can you speak more about the title of the piece, which I think is crucial to the understanding of some of your main ideas, and your idea of a sculpture that democratizes art by being modular and flexible in order to be able to be handled and reconfigured by the audience?

RA It was during the making of *Chaar Yaar*, in 1968, that I became aware of the creative potential of the breaking of static structures into flexible and movable work. When I tried to put four cubes together, I realized that I could make more than one configuration, which then led me to thinking of publicly made artwork. If the phenomenon of breaking static or fixed structures and then their subsequent multiple configurations could be continuous, it would create a movement toward infinity, which in fact the public itself could realize. All I have to do is to make a static, symmetrical structure (representing zero position), and then invite the public to dismantle it and make their own configurations, which when lead continuously toward infinity.

JH In your book *Art Beyond Art: Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the 21st Century* (2010) you speak about how art has been reduced to picture and object making. Did you understand the possible audience participation and interaction with your sculptures as a (metaphorical) dismantling of aesthetic structures governed by reactionary politics?

RA Once people can confront the rigidity of social structures and re-create these structures themselves, as part of their own productivity, it can lead to an equitable and egalitarian society.

JH Early on, you began speaking about your works as structures, not sculptures. I believe that this had to do with your background as an engineer, but it also points toward how you tried to make a clear distinction between your work and that of other artists employing minimal forms. Can you elaborate on this?

RA You are absolutely right. The so-called Minimalist work of the 1960s was comprised of lattice structures, which were taken from engineering and organized in a way one finds in engineering. So it was appropriate to call them "structures" rather than sculptures, particularly when they could not be defined as sculptures according to the prevailing theories.

JH What other non-Western artists did you meet during the late 1960s and early 1970s in London?

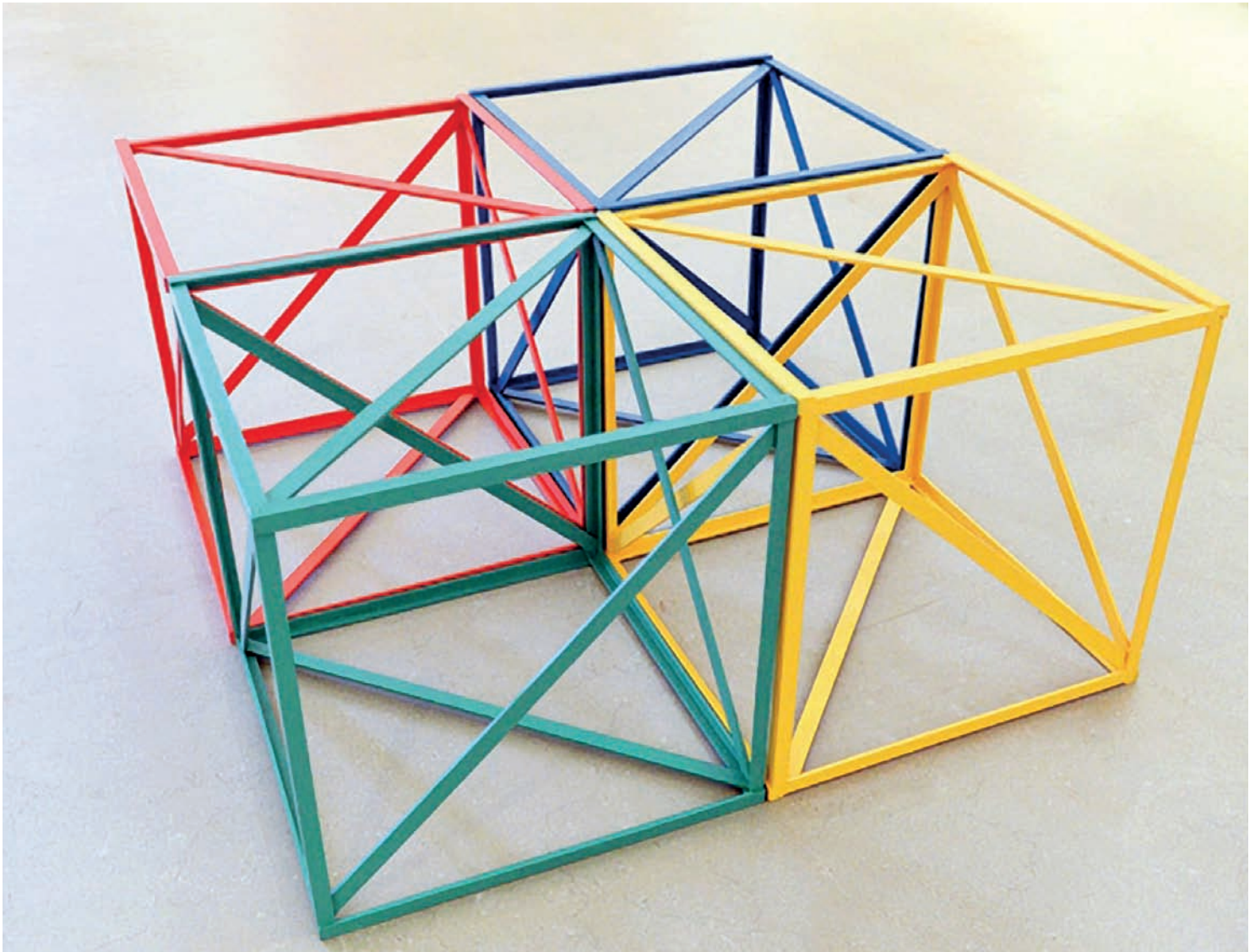
RA The only person I knew was David Medalla.

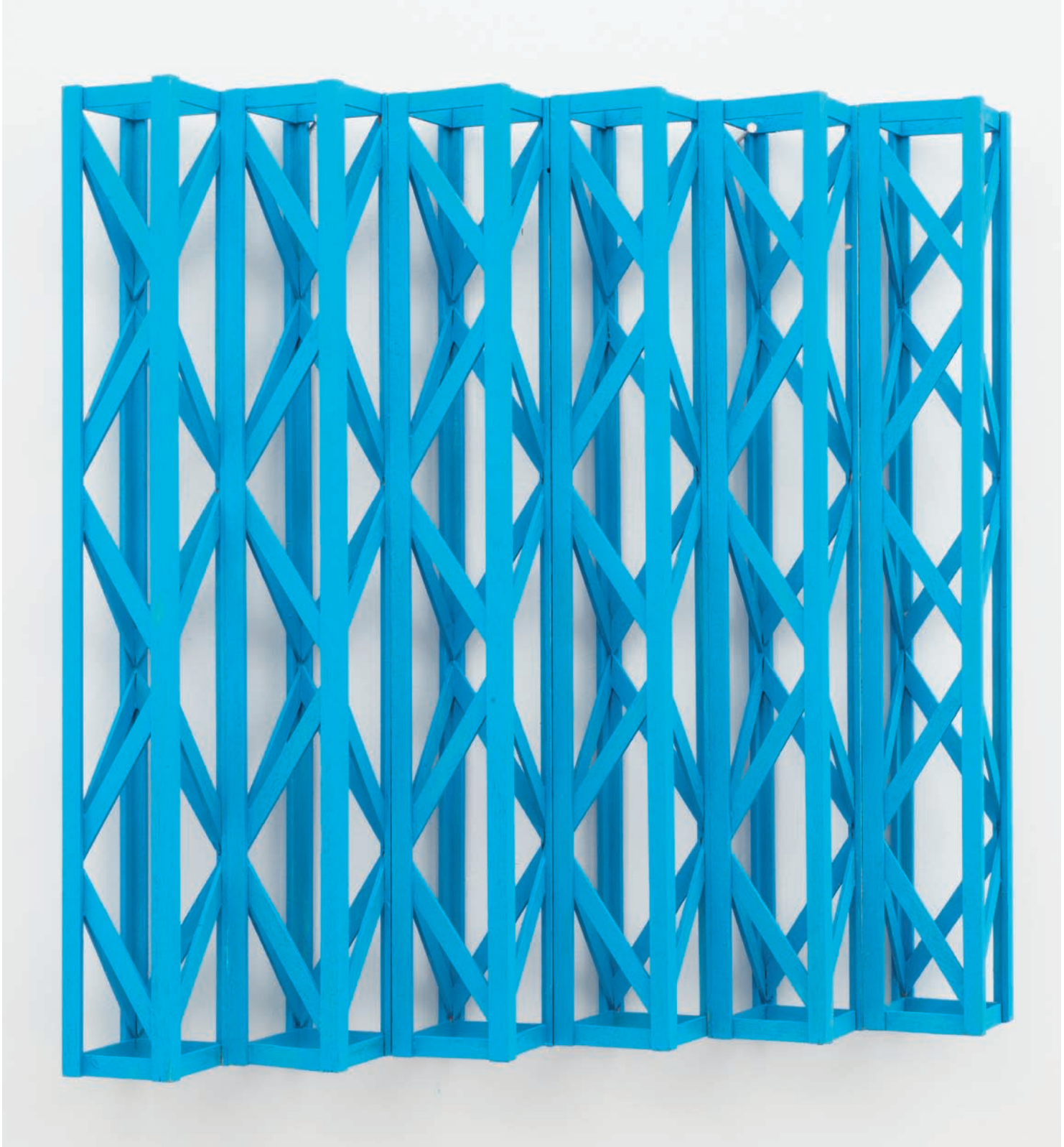
JH Like you, Medalla left his home country, in his case the Philippines, to move to London in the mid-1960s. He briefly ran the Signals gallery, which we talked about before. Its journal looked at Minimalism as a larger and much more complex set of global and political artistic expressions.

RA I first met David Medalla during my first visit to Signals, but it was only an exchange of greetings. It was in 1968 during one of his performances of *Exploding Galaxy* that we properly met and spoke to each other; following this we met at the Arts Lab, where I took part in his performance. For the next two years, I didn't see him, as he was traveling abroad. On his return in 1970, we met at the Camden Art Centre, where he did his performance *Down with the Slave Trade*. Luckily, I photographed it; now it is the only document of this performance.

JH This brings us to your work in the 1970s, which was much more performance oriented. Can you describe the circumstances that led you to make the performance *Paki Bastard (Portrait of the artist as a black person)* in 1977?

RA Following my meeting with David, we met regularly and talked about the relationship between art and politics. In fact,





Cricklewood Broadway, 2014.
Courtesy: Aicon Gallery, New York

David played a central role in my politicization in relation to art. In 1974 he invited me to join Artists for Democracy, where I had my first show in March 1975. Although I visited Artists for Democracy regularly and took part in its activities, I never did a performance, which was the regular feature there. However, during one visit to Artists for Democracy in the spring of 1977, David he asked me to do a performance as part of the final program. My first response was that I did not want to do it, as I did not want to do what everyone else was doing. But when I returned home, I started thinking about the request. And it was during this time that I came across a news item in the *Guardian* that said something like, “A policeman called an Asian man ‘Paki Bastard’ while beating him outside the Grunwick factory where Asian women workers were on strike.” I then went back and told David that I would indeed do a performance.

JH In 1972 you joined the Black Panthers, which I did not know existed in the UK and must have had their own political objectives, given the differences between the political histories of the United States and Britain—slavery on the one hand, and colonialism on the other. You began to describe yourself as an Afro-Asian artist. Can you speak more about this specific term, and the concept of an Afro-Asian identity?

RA Following my winning a prize at John Moore’s Biennale in Liverpool, in 1969, I was somewhat allowed to enter the British art world. But this entry was disturbingly short-lived. I suddenly encountered something that I neither knew nor expected, but was everywhere: wherever I went looking for a gallery to show my work, the answer was no. One gallery told me: “We loved your work [the director of this gallery had visited my studio and spent one hour looking at my work], but we can’t show you.” When I expressed surprise, the explanation was: “We only show English and American artists.” This led not only to frustration and disenchantment but also to confusion. I did not know why was I being treated like this, but after I read Frantz Fanon things began to get clearer. I suddenly realized that we were still living under the conditions of colonialism and that racism was deeply enshrined within its ideology.

I knew about racism and experienced it in everyday British life, and we often talked about it among friends. It was one of these friends, already a member of the Black Panthers, who persuaded me to join. Although the Black Panthers in the States were the inspiration for the group’s formation in London, the London Panthers were different. The difference lay in the nature of racism in Britain, as you suggested, which was the legacy of colonialism: whoever was colonized was “black” (in the 1960s, racism was also directed against Irish people). It was this colonial “blackness” that united Asian, African, and Caribbean people in Britain, resulting in a common identity. Historically and politically, this unity of African and Asian people was also formed and asserted by the Bandung Conference in 1955.

JH *Third Text*, which you founded in 1987, was the most important voice for the discussion of art made outside the Western-dominated art world. Moreover, it formulated a radical and (until that point) rather soft critique of the Eurocentric fixation of the art world. *Third Text* unmasked the Western art canon as an accumulation of authoritative and ideologically biased injustices and prejudices. Tell me about the origins of magazine. I know it grew out of *Black Phoenix*, which you founded in the late 1970s, and has evolved over the last thirty years.

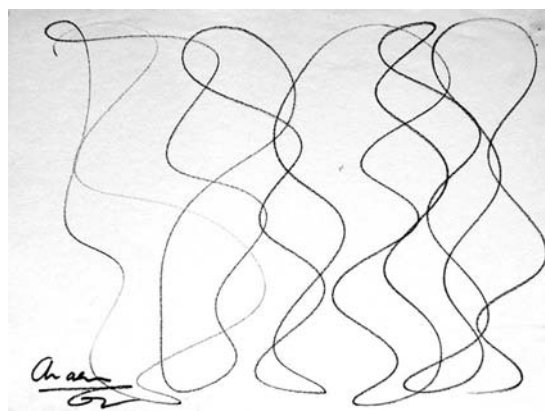
RA The basis of both publications was my “Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto” of 1975, in which I pointed out the continuing legacy of colonialism embedded within Western art institutions, and addressed the nature of racism in real life and the art world, finally suggesting an alternative to art defined, recognized, and promoted by the West. After I finished writing this text, there was the problem of its publication. Who would publish it? Although *Studio International* promised to do so, the future of this magazine became uncertain in 1977, which created uncertainty about the publication of “Black Manifesto.” This gave me the idea to publish it myself.

I realized that there must be a lot of unpublished radical writings or texts, particularly from the Third World, that needed a

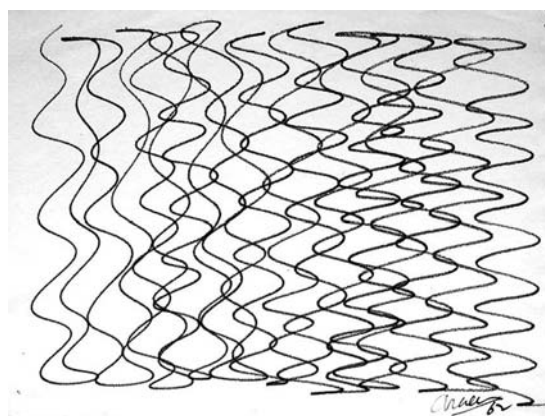
platform. I decided to start a publication that would give a platform to voices that were not yet heard, and/or writings not published by the prevailing art magazines. My thinking that the struggle for a radical alternative to Eurocentric discourse must be collective led to the emergence of the first issue of *Black Phoenix* in January 1978. However, there was little public awareness of the issues *Black Phoenix* tried to deal with, and we did not have enough readership to sustain it beyond three issues.

Six months after the first issue of *Black Phoenix*, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* appeared, which was the beginning of postcolonial discourses and finally created the kind of awareness that *Black Phoenix* failed to, and by the mid-1980s things began to change. It was in this changed situation that *Black Phoenix* reemerged as *Third Text* in 1987. I should say that the background to the founding of *Third Text* is extremely complicated and complex, and it is not possible here to tell the whole story.

JH How would you describe the impact of globalization on cultural practices outside the Western context? And how much has postcolonial theory influenced the shifts and changes in the perception of art from the so-called margins?



Series B (2), 1962. Courtesy: Aicon Gallery, New York



Series B (5), 1962. Courtesy: Aicon Gallery, New York

RA Globalization has indeed had a great impact on art all over the world, and postcolonial theory has somewhat influenced this change. But I would like to separate the work of *Third Text* from the postcolonial discourse, which was somewhat a product of and legitimized by Western academia. Although *Third Text* did try to have a dialogue with postcolonial theory, it was somewhat a failure, because the entry of postcolonial discourse into art was opportunistic and thus failed to recognize the issue of continuing imperialism of Western art institutions and the art history they continued to legitimize and promote.

JH You said that *Third Text* was about taking down the barrier between criticism and art making. Writing has been part of the practice of many artists, especially in the postwar period. How was what you were doing different?

RA You are right, but writing has actually *not* been part of the practices of many postwar artists in the so-called Third World. However, this writing was specific to the problems of Europe and the West, as part of the specificity of art movements that emerged as a response to these problems. Moreover, this ignored its relationship



Going East installation view at Rossi & Rossi, Hong Kong, 2015-2016. Courtesy: Rossi & Rossi, Hong Kong / London

with the colonial world and the fact that the institution, which underpinned this writing, still carried within it the legacy of what was produced by colonialism. In my writing I tried to confront this legacy, to liberate not only those who were the victims of this legacy, but also its perpetrators.

JH I would like to speak about *The Other Story*, an exhibition you organized in 1990 at Hayward Gallery in London. Many people believe it was a direct response and critique to *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), which you heavily criticized as fetishizing the exotic other. I also read that you actually worked on it before Jean Hubert Martin opened his influential yet highly controversial exhibition at the Centre Pompidou. Can you clarify the timeline?

RA The awareness in the 1970s that the prevailing institutionalized art discourse was based on the historically privileged white male gave women the basis to complain about their absence from it, which then resulted in four women curating a show of women artists at the Hayward Gallery in 1978. Although I supported this exhibition, I could not ignore the disturbing fact that even this show excluded nonwhite artists. It was this exhibition that led me into thinking that we could also do our own show, resulting in *The Other Story* at the Hayward Gallery in 1989. It was in fact conceived in 1978, and had nothing to do with *Magiciens de la Terre*, and if *The Other Story* turned out to be a critique of *Magiciens*, it was just a coincidence.

JH You also curated another important exhibition that is today much less talked about, titled *The Essential Black Art* (1987). Can you speak more about this exhibition?

RA The early postwar generation of artists in Britain who had come from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean carried with them ideas that had been formed in their countries. Some of them did receive recognition and enjoyed successful careers, but even then they were excluded from the history of art in Britain. The generation that was born in the UK faced a different situation. The children of African and Asian people faced racism right from their childhood, and when they went to art schools in the late 1970s they had no information about their cultures' past achievements. Facing also the racism of the art schools, they decided to find their own way to make art, and they called it Black Art. However, this so-called Black Art carried with it the ignorance of the past; it did not know that what it wanted to do had historical precedents. *The Essential Black Art* was about confronting this ignorance, and putting the whole thing together historically.

JH Your entire practice is about the various possibilities of meaningful social action, and in particular the establishment of an identity for a Third World artist through art by developing a radical political position. It seems as if this position is just as relevant today as it was at the outset of your career, given right-wing political shifts around the world.

RA I don't know how to deal with this issue. The situation you invoke has now become very complex. You are right in saying that

things have not much changed. The idea of a radical Third World artist has collapsed with globalization, and faced with the enormous power of the somewhat benevolent neoliberal art institutions of the West, there is not much one can do in terms of radical politics.

JH Tell me more about your upcoming book, *The Whole Story: Art in Postwar Britain*.

RA The Taiwanese scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen wrote a book, *Asia as Method* (2010), in which he discusses various ways toward what he calls the de-imperialization of knowledge created by imperialism. But his solutions are flawed, based on postcolonial cultural studies. He fails to understand that you cannot de-imperialize any knowledge unless you have the ability to penetrate this knowledge and change it from within. We have the same problems with the imperialism of Eurocentric art history, which is based on the primacy of white subjectivity within modernism, and what thus prevails exclusively are the narratives of the achievements of white artists.

My idea was to penetrate this art history by creating a common narrative of white and nonwhite artists, so as to liberate modern art history from the legacies of colonial imperialism. The first attempt in this respect was *The Other Story*, which showed what was deliberately excluded from mainstream art history. With *The Whole Story* I want to integrate this excluded material with what already existed within British art history, producing thus a model for rewriting of art history that is inclusive and liberated from its imperialist past.

JH How would you describe your relationship to the established art world today? Your work has been acquired by some of the most important museums around the world.

RA The simple answer to your question would be: problematic. It is true that important museums have started acquiring my work, but the question remains: How are they *representing* my work? The Tate has now acquired five or six of my works, but they are being mishandled, to say the least. They still are being kept outside the mainstream history of art in Britain. I should be grateful to the institutions for their support of my work, but I am not sure if this support will last long and or have any impact on the Eurocentric structures of the institutions themselves.

JH This sounds rather pessimistic and stands in contrast to what the museums would say. Will your project for documenta 14 address this issue at all?

RA For the last fifteen or so years I have been developing ideas about how artistic creativity could become part of the productivity of everyday life, which resulted in my book *Art Beyond Art* (2010). My two projects for documenta 14 deal with some of these ideas, in which I invoke the possibility of artistic creativity entering the acts of looking, reading, cooking, eating, et cetera. For Athens I have designed a pavilion comprising six canopies whose walls are decorated with geometric patchworks produced by women in Athens. The work, called *Shamiyaana*, invites the audience not only to *look* at these patchworks (an art produced collectively by women), but more importantly also to *think* about the whole art installation within which food would be cooked and eaten collectively. The work for Kassel is called *The Reading Room in Kassel*, comprising number of open cubical structures forming a large, low-level table on which issues of *Third Text* will be placed. On the walls of this installation will be some of my geometric works. So, while the audience looks at the artworks on the wall they can also sit around the table to read the material from *Third Text*.

Rasheed Araeen (1935) is a London-based conceptual artist, sculptor, painter, writer, and curator. He graduated in civil engineering from the NED University of Engineering and Technology in 1962, and has been working as a visual artist since his arrival in London from Pakistan in 1964. He founded and began editing the journal *Black Phoenix*, which in 1989, was transformed into *Third Text*.

Jens Hoffmann (1974) is a writer and exhibition maker based in New York and currently Director of Special Exhibitions and Public Programs at the Jewish Museum New York. He is Co-Artistic Director of Front International: Cleveland Triennial of Contemporary Art (2018) and Susanne Feld Hilberry Senior Curator at Large at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit.