

## The Art Of Difference

Rasheed Araeen has been described as one of the most important artists working in Britain today. Hannah Vowles and Glyn Banks examine his work and the way it challenges both modernist and post-modernist strategies

If today we live in post-modern times then this is simply to say that late capitalism has absorbed many of the challenges to the ideology of universal modernisation by feminism, gay, black and class struggles – playing them back to us as ‘designer difference’ for global consumption. If, as Arthur Kroker says in his recent book *Body Invaders*, the fascination of capitalism today is that it thrives on the language of every kind of (sexual as well as ethnic) difference, it comes as no surprise that the theorisation (and formation) of a ‘resistant body’ is particularly troublesome.

Rasheed Araeen is one of the most important contemporary artists working in Britain today. At the same time, however, he is the most underrated. The almost complete exclusion of Araeen from the recent history of ‘avant garde’ activity in this country is due in no small measure to the fact that he was born in Pakistan (1935) and trained to be a civil engineer at the University of Karachi.

His arrival in London in 1964 as an immigrant from an ex-colony, together with the fact that he had become a ‘self-taught’ artist, meaning that he had received no formal art education in a recognised institution, has proved to be a double handicap for the art establishment of this country. This to such an extent that it is only in the last two years that it has begun to realise that the apparent lack of ‘firm ground’ available to categorise Araeen’s work is the very sign of its success, and something which he has exploited throughout his career.

Perhaps it is also a recognition that Araeen has been working with the problematic of a ‘schizophrenic cultural identity’ for over 20 years. Today this has become something which we all experience, to a lesser or greater extent, as displaced bodies suspended between the corporate identity of multi-national capital and a designer subjectivity based

solely on consumption. So now we can learn something from his work.

A retrospective of his work from 1959-1987 is somewhat ironically entitled ‘From Modernism to Post-modernism’ as if Araeen had merely followed the general flow of cultural trends from the 60s through to the 80s. What this title leaves out is the main characteristic of Araeen’s work – an attitude of *resistance* and *contestation* towards these trends.

If *resistance* implies a turning inwards and a re-discovery of a hidden history (not in any essentialist sense of a search for roots or origins; but as an alternative framework to help formulate the cultural identity of the displaced black artist); then the spirit of *contestation* implies a turning outwards to address and deconstruct the dominant cultural formations to reveal not a ‘universal’ culture but a hegemony of particular interests.

This double movement is what has allowed Araeen to sustain his critical position for so long, without falling prey to the myths of either modernism/postmodernism as ‘emancipation’, or of ‘ethnicity’ as the rooted ‘other’ culture of the Third World.

As is well-known, the concept of internationalism was very much in vogue throughout the 50s and 60s as a utopian alternative to the recent catastrophes associated with nationalism in Europe, and Rasheed Araeen on his arrival in Britain was very much attracted by its ‘democratic’ appearance. At first very much an admirer of the sculptors Anthony Caro and Philip

King, especially with regard to their free use of materials, Araeen came to reject this work on both aesthetic and ideological grounds. He found it was still concerned with *hierarchical* composition; something which Araeen associated with the hierarchical nature of ‘pre-modern’ nationalist culture.

It began to be obvious to Araeen around the beginning of the 70s that the ‘democratic’ claims being advanced for modernism in both art and society were veiling the particular interests of powerful elites. It was inconceivable to the white art establishment in this country that an ex-colonial ex-civil engineer could be moving in the same direction as the most advanced ‘avant garde’ work being produced in New York. His work was discussed instead in relation to, and as a development of, Islamic non-representational art, thereby excluding it from the mainstream debate of the time concerning the new ‘art of the real’.

As he points out in his detailed and comprehensive publication by Kala Press entitled *Making Myself Visible*, the honeymoon was very short-lived between the British cultural and political establishment and the newly emerged post-colonial Commonwealth countries, during which time there seemed to be an optimistic spirit of exchange and equality. It soon became clear, however, that Britain was going to fall in line with the new empire of North American imperialism and, following the Vietnam war, neo-colonialism was to become the new relationship to the ‘Third

World’.

In a recent interview Araeen has said: ‘I did not know that you have to be *eligible* for a heroic position to achieve ... recognition. My eligibility, as I became a *black* person in the white society, posed a basic contradiction in the ideology of modernism.’

Araeen began to realise that to continue in some way with his ‘democratic’ modernist project he had both to *resist* being placed outside of modernism (as a form of cultural imperialism) as an ‘ethnic’ artist, the development of whose work could only be understood in relation to his specific (‘primitive’) cultural context; and also at the same time to *contest* the claims of modernism to be ‘universal’.

This he began to do by ‘making himself visible’ through the insertion of his own ‘subject-ivity’ into his art, with a series of works such as ‘Burning Ties’, ‘Paki Bastard: Portrait of the Artist As A Black Person’ (referring among other things to Margaret Thatcher’s famous speech: ‘I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people of a different culture’) and the series of ‘Ethnic Drawings’.

During this time he also founded (with Mahmood Jamal) a magazine, *Black Phoenix*, to raise the profile of Afro-Asian contributions to culture; joined the Black Panther Movement; helped found and organise the co-operative gallery ‘Artists for Democracy’; and began setting up ‘Black Umbrella’ resource and information centre, which began to document the hidden history of Afro-Asian art in Britain.

It is more than ironic, though no doubt predictable, that when the ‘internationalist’ claims of the modern movement were realised through modernisation, that they should appear as the blank look of power of corporate capitalism, and its ‘democratic’ aspirations be realised as the freedom of choice of consumerism. This state of affairs has in recent



**A White Line Through Africa: Challenging the internationalist arrogance implicit in Western art**

times given rise to various reactions which either celebrate the illusion of the disappearance of power through freedom of consumption, or assert local and cultural difference, where it can still be found, as resistance to this 'emancipation'.

Thus it is with the dawning of postmodernism that Afro-Asian artists begin to be sought out by the art establishment (and the Arts Council begins its policy of 'positive discrimination' towards 'Black Art') for funding and promotion. Rasheed Araeen both profits and suffers by this new patronage.

On the one hand he has been able to gain funding to publish *Third Text: Third World Perspectives On Contemporary Art And Culture* (distributed by Central

Books), a quarterly magazine; he has curated the exhibition 'Essential Black Art' currently travelling to five regional arts centres throughout Britain; and finally, has been invited to curate a major exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 1989 of the history of Afro-Asian art in Britain.

Yet, on the other hand, he is very aware that 'Black Art' is being promoted as a separate strand in contemporary art, and entails a desperate search for signs of authentic difference. Thus it is that his latest works resist postmodernism, in that they refuse an essential black identity as authentic (and therefore static and unchangeable, which by extension implies that the 'Third World' should remain

'exotic', that is, 'underdeveloped' and dependent) as a substitute for the designer subjectivity of post-industrial consumerism. At the same time as it contests the illusion of free-floating eclecticism as a liberation from power, through its recognition that although the world may now only consist of 'signs of the real', these signs are embodied in daily experience and, however much we might wish to be free, leave their traces, that is, scars, across our bodies.

In spite of the much vaunted support for 'Black Art' and cultural difference in Britain today, it is an indication of the continuing inability to come to terms with Araeen's work and its implications concerning our 'schizophrenic cultural

identity' in postmodern consumer society, that this exhibition has, as yet, to find a venue to stage it in London; the illusory centre of art activity in Britain.

Taking this absent subject as symbolic, Araeen, in a recent installation challenged the internationalist arrogance implicit in Western art and in particular in the work of one of Britain's best known sculptors, Richard Long. Araeen maintains that Long's vision is one in which the world is stripped of human presence, and in which the heroic and romantic figure of the artist can walk uninvited, claiming it for oneself and for art. Nature is, for Long, beyond conflict, which enables him to walk through the Algerian Sahara, making sculptures on the way, oblivious to the sufferings of war and starvation. He is followed by a vastly expensive film-crew hired to document his every move for the Arts Council of Great Britain.

With this installation, entitled 'When The Innocent Begins To Walk The Earth' Araeen plagiarises and re-frames Long's work. 'Arctic Circle', a circle not of stones but of empty wine bottles, referring as much to the status of the artist as star, as it does to the plight of Eskimos in coming into contact with 'progress'. 'A White Line Through Africa', looks deceptively like a line of flints, one of Long's favourite materials, which, on closer inspection turn out to be a line of bleached bones.

Although today plagiarism is hugely popular as a post-modern pastime, such *critical* use by Araeen has given many people problems with the status of these works as 'art'. If in fact, Baudrillard's deconstructive image of the simulacrum means the death of the grand referents of the real then everything is in fact 'derivative', and so it is that the work of Rasheed Araeen forces us to face the complicity of the culture-industries with the unequal power relations of the 'post-' and the 'pre-' modern worlds. ●