In other's words - Sarat Maharaj - Interview

by Daniel Birnbaum, Sarat Maharaj

THAT SARAT MAHARAJ IS A BIT TOO INTELLIGENT for the art world, as a friend of mine recently claimed, I cannot accept. Without the presence of a few minds like his, the whole business would be just too dull. A biographical remark in a recent publication notes that the South African-born art historian, based in London since 1976, “has lectured and published throughout the world on cultural translation and difference. He is an authority on the work of Richard Hamilton, Marcel Duchamp, and James Joyce, and his experimental writings include essays on textile art, sound work [Maharaj's “Xeno-sonics”] and visual theory constructions [the essay "Monkeydoodle"]." The contributor’s note doesn’t mention his incredibly articulate manner. The pleasure I get out of listening to Maharaj is always countered by the depressing realization that I will never handle the English language--or any other--with such precision.

I met up with Maharaj at Berlin’s Humboldt-Universitat, where he became the first Rudolf Arnheim Professor of Art History last summer. He is spending a semester away from London’s Goldsmiths College, where he has taught art history and theory over the last decade. His seminars in Berlin are already famous, attended not only by academics in the city but by critics, architects, and artists as well. On the Thursday evening that I sat in on his lively class, two of the fastest talkers in the business, architect Rem Koolhaas and curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist, bombarded the audience with more information than a university student typically receives in a semester. In another seminar, Maharaj discussed problems that originate in the analytical philosophy of science and branch out into domains as various as cognitive biology, the writings of Marcel Duchamp, and globalist economics. The author of such essays as "The Congo is Flooding the Acropolis: Black Art and Orders of Difference" (1991) and "Perfidious Fidelity: The Untranslatability of the Other" (1994), Maharaj has recently left the semi-obscure confines of advanced critical theory to join the group of curators assisting Okwui Enwezor in preparing and staging Documenta11, which opens in Kassel this June. (The art historian has devoted a seminar titled "Thinking Documenta and Doing Documenta" to creating a reflective space for the critical assessment of this mega-event.) This year will also see the publication of two new books by Maharaj: an extensive collection of essays designed by Ecke Bonk and given the Joycean title Works in Progress: Experiments in Think-speak-write Sequences 1 (INIVA) and A Strife of Tongues: Richard Hamilton/Marcel Duchamp/James Joyce (Typosophic Society), which Hamilton is designing. Maharaj’s theoretical competence, combined with his willingness to bring the concepts of cultural, diversity and difference to a more public forum, makes him a key intellectual voice on the Continent today.

DANIEL BIRNBAUM: Your seminar at Berlin’s Humboldt-Universitat has quickly become a meeting point for intellectuals and artists. What are you focusing on at the moment?

SARAT MAHARAJ: The main research seminar is simply called Ideas Lab. We are looking at issues in the philosophy-of-science debate between Paul Feyerabend and Imre Lakatos through the flurry of letters they exchanged. Amid lovely passages of gossip, they are tussling with the kinds of restrictions and limits a model of critical rationality actually puts on scientific practice. For Feyerabend, the logic of scientific discovery proceeds less in terms of pregiven notions of rigor and rationality--our stereotype of science--than in haphazard, open-ended, hit-or-miss, patchwork ways. Hence his countermodel, an anarchist epistemology, which is sometimes oversimplified, mocked, and parodied as an "anything goes" paradigm of thinking. Each Ideas Lab session closes with a reading of sections of Ulysses in German and English.
We are exploring problems coming out of art practice. But we find them tied up with some unlikely theoretical areas of counter-representational thinking. The seminar is about ideas, conjectures, models—as well as a kind of unhinging of academic, system-locked philosophy. The Feyerabend-Lakatos debates provide models of thinking and knowing that in some way seem to continue the interrogation of representationalism in Deleuze and Guattari, who were keen to see philosophy as being not so much about depicting what’s "out there" as about creating concepts through which to activate new mappings of the world, new feelings, subjectivity, behavior, action.

Feyerabend proclaimed himself a scientific theoretician of an absolute anarchist bent. I find it particularly interesting that he felt this was even better described as a Dadaist epistemology. What he meant by this at moments sounds almost like elements in Marcel Duchamp's Notes to the Large Glass (with its own echoes of and borrowings from Bergson and Poincare). Duchamp's speculations on "ironic physics," "emancipated metals of oscillating density," 4-D geometries, virtual images, etc., add up to poetic elements for a "hilarious painting"—an artwork for which there is no previous model. Feyerabend's Dada model is reminiscent of this nominalist epistemology—Duchamp speaks of a "pictorial nominalism"—the artwork is invented in its making, not according to the givens of what is Art. Hence his fantastic paradox: How to make a work of art that isn't a work of art? One can sense roughly the "unscriptedness" that Feyerabend will take up for his Dada epistemology. More light is thrown on what he means if we mull over his remark that his greatest regret was not having taken the job offered to him to be Brecht's assistant. A reflexive, ironic art-practice type of paradigm of scientific thought.

DB: So you link these philosophical problems to art history?

SM: Perhaps more to art practices than to art history. But it's suggestive to recall how Aby Warburg sought to stretch the limits of art history with something like a Dada methodology—-with an assemblagist intellectual process. I think one finds more challenging models of thought and analysis among practicing artists and in the studio. For all the postwar theoretical ructions, art history has tended to remain a rather positivist discipline. This is over and above the theoretical sophistication introduced by Marxism, multiculturalism, feminism, queer studies, semiotics, or whatever.

DB: As a theorist you have made extensive use of French poststructuralism. How would you position yourself in relation to the group of art historians in the United States around the journal October?

SM: Perhaps a distinction has to be drawn between the engagements with poststructuralist thought and arthistorical approaches in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the UK the emergence of the postcolonial perspective has to be kept foremost in mind. At any rate, an awareness of emigration and exile, of escape from European fascism, marked the modern shape of the discipline. A strong theoretical tradition of one variety or another was associated with art historians who fled Europe and settled in or passed through England: Gombrich, Antal, Hauser, Klingender, Ettlinger, Wind, Arnheim. Look at Gombrich's engagement with Karl Popper's philosophy of science and compare it with Feyerabend's critique of Popper. In the early days, the joke was that unless you had a Central European accent you could not be taken seriously in art history. Eventually that particular mix of philosophical viewpoints faded, leaving a less theoretically keyed art history. In the '70s, French theory became the stuff of new questions about other canons and systems of value and thought-about difference introduced by awareness of colonial liberation struggles, gender debates, the presence of immigrants in shaping contemporary cultural life in England.

DB: All of which parallels developments in the United States.
SM: It seems to me that in the United States at the time it was a kind of intertextual tussle—battles between positions academics had to carve out within the university system. I hope I’m not badly wrong in interpreting things this way. This seems to have had more to do with the way the university sphere becomes another branch of the consumerist industrial production—a development we are now witnessing elsewhere in the world. Theoretical currents and choices are mixed up with the demand for new intellectual commodities and imports in an academic setting.

French theory arrives in the United States in a systematic way through university circuits—sometimes introduced by the French theoreticians themselves as visiting professors and lecturers. In England, social and political malaise made "French thought" an exciting medium, an alien tool for thinking. French theory was not, as was the case with "French culture," associated with upper-class taste and bourgeois refinement. It was stuff that could be applied to popular culture, mass media, television, fashion, and working-class involvement in visual culture. It had to do with the end of empire, the emergence of a postcolonial juncture. Someone like Stuart Hall would invoke poststructuralists to understand the immigrant in Britain, to speak of the invisible colonial subject now present in the heart of the old empire. How is this subject to be made visible? Hall, Dick Hebdige, Homi Bhabha, Rasheed Areen, the journal Third Text, among others, would use French thinkers in a way that might be appalling to these thinkers themselves. Their ideas were really reinvented in the British context. An example would be Deleuze and Guattari's "Rhizome"—the first part of A Thousand Plateaus—which collages references to unlikely non-French literary figures such as William S. Burroughs, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Hardy, James Joyce. Because of the empirical density of writing and thinking in the English novel, Deleuze and Guattari saw it as a creative method of analyzing the world in the process of writing. The British interest in, and creative misreading of, such texts is different, more diffuse and scattered, than the systematic, academic-voiced, regulated engagement with Deleuze, as is the case in the journal October, in the US. Why take Deleuze and Guattari as the criterion? Because they are looking for nonacademic models of thinking, for a pragmatics, for idea-machines for action, intervention in, transformation of life—contraptions of a Dadaist epistemology, we might say.

Interestingly, there is hardly a French poststructuralist from Derrida to Helene Cixous who hasn’t written on Joyce. There is a vibrant use, or misuse, of British writers by French thinkers, and later a misuse, in the creative sense, of French writers by British thinkers, all of which suggests a vigorous kind of cross-translation of ideas and texts. That's the atmosphere in which much of the questioning of art history and visual studies took place in England. There is no reverence toward French thought. It was nor really an academic endeavor as in the United States. It was all much more confused, collaged, chaotic, dispersed, thought-bending.

DB: More productive?

SM: It was in the best sense more of an English muddle—a Dadaist epistemological event without ever being seen quite like that. I would say that responses to French thought in Britain have been more creative, more in the spirit of Deleuze's nonsequential, nonlinear, "rhizomatic" thinking. The model in the chapter "Rhizome" is an artist's studio. There you take a bit of this and a little bit of that, and you throw it together to see if it works. That question—"Does it work?"—is really only asked in the studio. We don’t quite know what we mean by this, but somehow we all have the feeling that it offers a way of describing what it means to create a work. Kodwo Eshun’s study of Afro/Black music, More Brilliant than the Sun, is a somewhat later work inspired by this attitude.

DB: Why have you chosen to do so much research on Joyce and Duchamp? They’re not exactly working-class or popular-culture subjects.
SM: I grew up and was educated in South Africa at the height of the apartheid years in a university for nonwhites of Indian origin. There were segregated universities for about seven different ethnic groups created by the regime's race classification laws. Duchamp and Joyce were taboo in the prevailing conservative notions of art and culture. For me it was a form of resistance to be involved in something that was considered out of one's scope—-as were Genet, Pinter, Arnold Wesker, and Brecht among others. "Out of one's scope" is a euphemism for the fact that one was seen as not quite ethnically right for such interests.

DB: You were already interested in Joyce and Duchamp in South Africa?

SM: I was interested in a minor sort of way in, let's say, "all that stuff" that was not mainstream or canonical and at the time had a strange kind of appeal. Duchamp was treated simply as the unspeakable urinal maker, except by a few critical artist-thinkers who occasionally managed to cross over the race barriers to speak to us-artists like Walter Battiss, Jack Grossert, Patrick O'Connor, and Andrew Verster. One would perhaps read Joyce's Dubliners, but nothing of the more experimental writings, not Ulysses, let alone Finnegans's Wake. To my surprise, that was still how things were in the UK, with few exceptions, when I first arrived, in the '70s. So when we talk of Duchamp, we really must distinguish the rarefied setup in the '70s from the academic industry that took off in the '80s and '90s.

DB: What is it about these two figures that maintains your interest today?

SM: It has to do with translation. Duchamp's emigration, Joyce's exile, threw them into pondering difference and translation on several fronts. I also became increasingly interested in translation as a model through which to examine globalization. Even a thinker like Antonio Negri today places tremendous emphasis on the scene of transference, transmission, and translation. It was always of interest to look at Duchamp from this particular perspective. I was enthralled by my teacher Richard Hamilton's mysterious translation of Duchamp's notes into English. Hamilton could neither read nor speak French and called himself a "monolingual translator." Duchamp hailed the translation as a sublime event, a "crystalline transubstantiation" and a "monster of veracity." This notion of monstrousness comes back in [Michael Hardt and] Negri's book Empire. In a globalized economy one finds forms of translation that are so true as copies that it unnerves the original. In the face of such a copy the authentic dissolves. The globalized economy is a monster in a Duchampian sense, a monster of ultrarapid translations.

DB: There has been so much academic research concerning the art of Duchamp over the last several decades. What other writers do you feel close to?

SM: Actually, I have little to do with the world of academic Duchamp research. It has its glittering exponents. But that sort of representational tracing and scholarship of Duchamp is of little interest to me. I'm much more excited by the counter-representation-alists, people who do something with his ideas. Practitioners rather than academics--the Typosophic society, Richard Hamilton, Anthony Hill, Ecke Bonk, Jean Sabrier, even the way Duchamp's "Bachelor Machines" have come to function in several French poststructuralist works.

DB: And what is translation for Joyce?

SM: He remains for me the "translator" of English who handed the "Jinglish Janglage" back to England transformed, ruining it creatively, as he said. His language disseminates and scatters meaning. It produces "dislocation"--the colonial subject's voice split over place and time. The Joyce that appealed to me and many others in England in the '70s was a writer who had much to say about the importance and
limits of identity and identity politics. The tribalism of being English, of being Irish, of being Catholic or Protestant, Loyalist or Nationalist replayed for me elements of apartheid mentality. It was impossible not to relate Joyce to events like the IRA terror, the civil rights movement, bombings in London, Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic. Rita Donagh’s and Richard Hamilton’s works looked at this terror as it unfolded but also through Joyce’s texts. Also, reading Joyce, I’m always astonished by how powerful the commentaries on India and Africa are in Ulysses and Finnegans’s Wake. It’s the voice of the subordinated.

DB: Via your work on and with Richard Hamilton, you have continued to be involved with Duchamp’s writings over the years.

SM: Hamilton translated Duchamp’s Green Box in the ’60s. The White Box he finished last year. In the lovely phrase of Ecke Bonk, one could say that ’we were present” when Hamilton was working on the material. That’s the right way to describe Ecke Bonk’s involvement and my own. Duchamp is an Ideas Lab for me. His writings are part of his artwork—one would not be able to make sense of the Large Glass without the notes. His writings are part of his de-retinalized art production—inseparable from it.

DB: What exactly is it that Hamilton does with Duchamp’s writings?

SM: His was the first typographic English translation of Duchamp’s notes. It’s not a straight French-to-English translation. I coined the term typo-translation, which is really a typographic translation from handwritten manuscript to type form. But it’s also an attempt to translate something of the visual quality of the manuscript into the typographic form. Duchamp talks of “juxtalinear” translation in a rather mysterious little jotting. He speaks of a kind of writing in which the looking produces the meaning, a writing that cannot be decoded alphabetically or phonetically, something that can only be “read” visually. It’s quite enigmatic and at apparent odds with his de-retinalizing stance. But one can find speculations of this kind in diverse traditions. Umberto Eco mulls over the issue of the language spoken in the Garden of Eden before phonetic languages had come into existence.

DB: And in Waiter Benjamin?

SM: Benjamin’s essay on the translator is an important reference. What was the language spoken before Babel? This is the theological, metaphysical question he asks.

He also seemed to harbor the hope of a future completeness in which shards of the shattered vessel of the original one language can be pieced together again.

DB: Which is hardly a hope of yours?

SM: Not quite. What Horst Bredekamp just mentioned when he stepped into the room—that I was described by the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung as a ”cool post-modern theoretician of conflict” in a report on a recent UN conference—is perhaps a bit relevant here. It leads me to say that I do not want to begin from a position of positing some primordial totality that has somehow to be reclaimed today. This is sometimes seen as the redemptive side of Benjamin’s thought. My starting point is more pidgin Hindu-Buddhist—or rather the school of Indian philosophy called Nyaya-Vaiseshika—which starts from the notion of difference, of ever-changing multiplicity, rather than recuperable ”oneness.”

I am hesitant before the monotheistic malady of oneness and the intolerance it unleashes. At the conference there was constant talk of overcoming differences, which is understandable especially in light of 9/11. But what sameness or ”oneness” is intended? My view is that contemporary culture and visual-art practices on their more fruitful side should be seen as productions of difference—as
heterogenesis. The challenge of a modern notion of culture and ethics, of tolerance, is how to live with heterogeneity and plurality. A notion of a harmonic totality or consensus--Habermas’s or another--assumes too much. I think differences have to be tussled with in all their ever-mutating change. This doesn’t make me a ‘theoretician of conflict’ but perhaps one of difference.

DB: It seems to me that this is one of the threads that run through many of your texts: a will to account for alterity without reducing the otherness of the Other.

SM: How can you deal with alterity and otherness without always translating it into an epistemological frame of your own in which the Other is entirely present to you and accepted through the filter of your mental categories? That is, how to do so without violating the Other? How would this engagement with the Other, what I call the ethics of difference, be constructed? How is this scene to be understood? The call for sameness, a ground on which we meet as equals, seems to presuppose something like a Cartesian grid--difference is flattened out by the law of equivalence. What doesn’t fit the grid must be excluded as excrement.

DB: What was the UN conference about?

SM: The conference concerned how to deal with cultural difference in a world marked by the events of 9/11. The Goethe-Institut, the British Council, the Institut Francais, and other major cultural institutions wanted to explore the idea of “culture politics as crisis prevention.” How would cultural exchange and mutual cultural representation forestall clash and collision? The strategy becomes one of representationalism and spectacle--how to put one culture on display to another. This amounts to treating each culture as a static entity, a fixed identity, stereotyping and representing it as cultural essence--a bit like fixing diversity and putting it on display under apartheid. This control by fixing difference into static components of cultural diversity is what I call multicultural managerialism. It’s a marked tendency in EU governmental policy, however well-intentioned. What I’m interested in, which may be a task doomed to failure, is different entirely. It’s the struggle to construct meaning together, across the borders of cultural difference. Only the meltdown of one’s intellectual frame makes possible the genuine surprises of an ethical encounter.

DB: These issues must be relevant to you as a cocurator of DocumentaII.

SM: I’m not a professional curator. I don’t have the megashow curatorial experience of the sort my colleagues on the DocumentaII team have. The idea of spheres of discourse and debate-the five Platforms of DocumentaII--is a distinctive creation of Okwui Enwezor. I enthusiastically joined him in elaborating the notion, but my contribution is not limited to that. I am as much involved in discussions over artists and works for selection for Kassel. It could not be otherwise. Over the years I have been deeply involved at Goldsmiths College, London, and at the Jan van Eyck Akademie, Maastricht, with practitioners and their art production. This inescapably takes in critiques of curatorial practice and systems of dissemination. All my own writing and work has been at the intersection of history/theory/practice. Two long-standing projects- “Monkeydoodle” [an article for Art Journal, 1997] and “Xeno-sonics” [shown as part of “Mutations” at Arc en Reve, Bordeaux]-are examples of my approach, which straddles the divides of creation! critique/curating and history/theory/practice.

DB: Is the concept of art, with its rather specific European genealogy, an adequate category for grasping these developments?
SM: The archaeology of the word art as understood within the Western system is an extensive subject. But look how dramatically we are leaving that system! Unless we are alert to the transformation of the concept and what we understand as “visual art,” we shall not be able to grasp changes even within what is still conventionally referred to as visual art. There is much activity in India, China, Africa that is radically interdisciplinary. It deterritorializes received concepts of art. Groups working on the Internet or with film, video, performance, and other practices are involved in modes of knowledge production that often have oblique relations to the visual. They amount to spasmodic events that are rather different from what passes as visual art in the museum-gallery system. Are such practices more like research machines through which social, political, visual, statistical, epidemiological data are telescoped? These are visual-intellectual evolutions that cannot be reduced to constructions of the art system. What we call art activity is expanding, extending, transmogrifying in the global contemporary setting. Hence also my dogged interest in Duchamp’s question “How to make a work of art that isn’t a work of Art?” For me, it’s a marker for ways we might be able to engage with works, events, spasms, ructions that don’t look like art and don’t count as art, but are somehow electric, energy nodes, attractors, transmitters, conductors of new thinking, new subjectivity and action that visual artwork in the traditional sense is not able to articulate.

DB: Instead of a “work” we get a “delay” in Duchamp.

SM: Yes. I’ve gone on to talk of an extra-rapid delay. At every turn, received ideas and definitions of the artwork are deferred and deterritorialized, held at bay, staved off: In a countermove, this clears the conductor for different possibilities, other experiences, ideas and thoughts to be expressed and flashed through at high speed.

DB: A recent contribution to the understanding of globalization is Hardt and Negri’s Empire. For the Documenta11. Platform in Vienna, “Democracy Unrealized,” you interviewed Negri in Rome. What is it that interests you in their work?

SM: How they are thinking of the local/global dichotomy. This is less clear-cut than it is often made out to be. Something springs up, dissolves, translates into something else. There is emergence, erosion, establishment. A rather recent element can come to be revered as local tradition. The fact that the local is constantly produced—that it is not ready-made and primordial—has to be taken on board. In discussions of globalization, the local is often treated as intrinsically good, the global as bad. But the local can also be quite negative, imprisoning, oppressive. The microdynamics of this relationship shows that things are much more crosshatched, mixed.

DB: What’s the function of Empire? I have the feeling it’s being read as a kind of manifesto rather than as a work of social philosophy.

SM: In the rousing concluding sections, the passages on St. Francis’s love and compassion, the book steps out of the genre of academic writing and approaches the voice of a manifesto or broadsheet. But even earlier chapters on biopower convey a sense of optimism and hope through fresh conceptualization. What in the past was called proletarian energy now appears in the restless, daring form of the multitude’s biopower. The account is shot through with a sense of tremendous possibilities for change. This puts it in a rather different class from other studies on the globalizing drives of the economy and marks it off from the rather gloomier registers of postmodernist thinking. There was a time when no change seemed possible—everything was seen to be in the grip of an octopus of institutionalizing logic at the end of history. Hardt and Negri mark a break in that discourse. Whether it’s a break that can be actualized in people’s lives remains to be tested. But the tone is exhilarating and
inclusive—as the monstrous, unstoppable migrations dissolve the idea of borders, an era of equality and human rights also unfolds. The future, they stress, is not mapped out in every detail but open-ended. We are, in Duchamp's phrase, poised "in the infinitive"—like a motorcar's engine throbbing in neutral but ready to spring in any direction.

SOURCE:
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_6_40/ai_82800088/?tag=mantle_skin;content