

re:place Conference 2007, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin  
Panel 9: Cross Cultural Perspectives  
Review by Mary Hammer

**Bernd Scherer:** Moderation

**Erkki Huhtamo:** Intercultural Interfaces: Correcting the Pro-Western Bias of Media History

**Cynthia Ward:** Minding Realities: Geometries of Cultural Cognition

**Manosh Chowdhury:** Can there be an 'Art History' in the South? Myth of Intertextuality and Subversion in the Age of Media Art

**Sheila Petty:** African Digital Imaginaries



This panel investigated the interrelationships and differences between Western and non-Western views. The moderator, Bernd Scherer (Director of Haus der Kulturen der Welt), stated that this investigation involves a great deal of exchange between cultures, and that the results may challenge the current definitions of modernity. Each panelist presented a paper that attempted to challenge the traditional Western view and encourage exchange between cultures.

The first presentation was made by Erkki Huhtamo, a media archaeologist, writer, and curator currently working as Professor of Media History and Theory at the University of California Los Angeles. His paper reflected on the idea that current media-historical scholarship does not take into account the extent and complexity of intercultural exchanges. Several problems impede this exchange: much relevant material is difficult to locate and access, it may be written in a language that few specialists can master, and much evidence has already been lost. He suggests that new institutional structures and scholarly networks are needed in order to remedy these problems. Pioneering works by Eric Michaels (*Bad Aboriginal Art*), Timon Screech (*The Lens within the Heart*) and Jack Goody (*The Theft of History*) were discussed as examples of scholarship that is headed in the right direction. As a case study, Huhtamo discussed the various versions of 'peep media' and its presentation as a European convention, when research shows its existence and rich use in Eastern cultures. He concludes that scholarship needs an extension of the current idea of media, as it extends laterally, linking cultures and continents.

Cynthia Ward, an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Hawaii Manoa, was meant to present on fractal art and its prevalence in Africa since ancient Egypt, but changed her topic. Instead, she discussed "Perspectivism", and its influence on the way we look at art. To open, Ward stated that Eskimos hang items on

their walls at various angles (upside down, sideways), but still perceive the subjects; it makes no difference which way it faces. To the Western mind, this way of looking at things would prove problematic: Western perspective has traditionally looked at a painting as an extension of the viewer's space. Her point was that visualization is not just a neurological process; it is a recursive feedback process involving cognitive functions. Ward cited studies showing that when language skill decreases, artistic skill increases, and cited examples of art that incorporate multiple perspectives. She concluded that art doesn't render the visible, it renders visible.

Manosh Chowdhury taught social anthropology and photo journalism in Bangladesh. His paper discussed the habit of describing media art in academic and elitist terms, leading to the labeling of contemporary media art as 'high art'. Consequently, he questions these assumptions about new media art, and points out that the quest for history of art is an epistemological problem: pedagogy caused confusion. Focusing on the South, Chowdhury ponders whether there is a history of art in the South, if there was an end to the history of art in a classical sense, and what it might mean to struggle for and claim an independent history of art in the South.

Sheila Petty, Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts and Professor of Media Studies at University of Regina (Canada), delivered the most discussion-provoking paper of the panel. She contextualized her paper by stating that taking the position that African cultures are only passive subjects without agency within globalization is to suggest that Africa is doomed to perpetual victimization. Instead, she says that African popular media confronts what it means to be African in this post-colonial world. The goal of her paper is to provide a new theoretical framework of conceiving Africa by exploring changes in Africa through an analysis of African digital art. As an example, Petty showed African artist Berni Searle's installation 'Snow White', a piece that appropriated Western tools for local purposes in art. The piece shows Searle as a black body in the beginning, and through events transforms to a black and white body at the end. Petty asserts that this change is a result of Africa's colonial history, and exemplifies the idea that Africa will not return to what it once was, but will be forever changed.

This panel inspired much comment and discussion. An important point was made: There was only one non-Western presenter on the panel, and very few non-Western presenters at the conference as a whole. One would hope that this would spark dialog regarding how to provide funding and support for non-Western scholars and research. Instead, after Sheila Petty's presentation, a gentleman asked "What gives you the right to interpret [Snow White]?"- A rather disappointing question that missed the Petty's point, as her analysis came from African theorists and was not a Western interpretation of a non-Western piece. In conclusion, this panel can and should reach past the confines of the conference and incite dialog in an ongoing discussion on how to incorporate interrelationships between cultures and equality of research in media scholarship.