

Another Look at Displacement: Emplacement versus Emplasures

Having claimed a glocal citizenship, today's artists function as in-between beings, their constant displacement resulting in the production and display of works in contexts other than their own. But it would be a mistake to think that this frequent-flying mobility is a sufficient basis for a productive nomadic art practice. As an interpreter of this phenomenon, I would rather stress *emplacement* (a term that I have appropriated from the history of fortification), which implies a condition that occurs in this case, due to conscious or accidental displacement. Artists *emplace* themselves, that is, they position themselves in a different location within or outside their country, engage with the local history of this new and chosen site, and forge strategic alliances with new disciplines and renew the frameworks of viewing.

But then again, this emplaced nomadism should not be seen as an angelic strategy – because there is a danger of artists maintaining an excess baggage of domiciled prejudices related to race, nationality, caste and class, wherever they travel. Thus emplacement runs the risk of becoming an emplasure (emplacement plus closure), when the self becomes a fence and the art a tangle of barbed wire that spikes the very self-definition of an artist as international citizen. In this connection, we would inevitably ask: How have contemporary artists tried to emplace themselves without reducing their art practice to an emplasure? At this junction, I will introduce the three protagonists of our narrative – Navjot Altaf (India), Belle Shafir (Israel) and Stefania Corbelli (Ireland) – who have consciously emplaced themselves, in a rural area in Navjot's case, and in their adopted countries in Belle's and Stefania's case. Their emplacements are achieved through an active displacement of their academic inheritance, and a consistent questioning of the role of art and its changing publics.

While on their individual journeys, Navjot, Belle and Stefania met at the Cyfuniad II (derived from the Welsh phrase, 'bringing together') International Artists Workshop, Wales, 2001, primarily organised by artists Lin Holland and David Lewis. There, they attempted to create a dialogue, as Lin puts it, "not by speaking similarly, but by emphasising difference". They explored the possibility of visiting each other's countries and also of emplacing their works in the other's cultural context. Belle and Navjot share a prehistory to Cyfuniad II, having met earlier at the Khoj International Artists Workshop, Delhi, in 1999.

These global criss-crossings, physical and ideological, have made the artists more sensitive to the distinctive orientation of each other's practice. For instance, in the current show, Belle and Navjot's installations respond to the common concern of the inscrutability of cultural gestures even when these appear to be universal. But first, we need to scan the glyphs of their lives, which may read like a fairly linear narrative in retrospect, but in actuality have gone through many smudgings and rewritings.

Belle, for instance, who has invented a script to tackle the issues of identity metaphorically, was brought up in a liberal Jewish family in post-World War II Germany. In 1972, she immigrated to Israel to trace her Jewish roots. But as we have seen, emplacement in a foreign context is fraught with risk. She remembers Israel as a flat small country and the area of Bnei Brak, where she lived with her aunt, as particularly orthodox, after an open German upbringing. Israel was Belle's utopia, but as the etymology informs us, utopia comes from the Greek *ou-topia*, 'no place'. Belle's challenge lay in emplacing herself in a 'no place', surviving the cultural discontinuities and adopting Israel as the base of her religious and political identity.

At 30, Belle studied American and European Realism at the Avni Institute of Art, Tel Aviv, languages that she had to unlearn later in her career. She had spent a considerable amount of time framing the landscape from her studio window, but fixed points of perception can create a reverse effect, that of distraction. Belle stepped out of the studio and broke this contract of realism. Collecting organic matter, roots and seeds, and combining these with the leftovers in her studio, she made ephemeral mixed-media works. Meanwhile, Belle's fascination for ancient and modern scripts found its expression in works titled, *seria litterae* ('series of letters'), *seria excavo* ('series from the caves') and *seria novo litterae* ('series of new letters'), exhibited in 1998. She despinated holy books belonging to different religions which she had bought in a secondhand sale and burnt the pages, embedded nails in them, allowing them to rot and rust. She also transformed window shutters into an ancient tablet by painting her own secret language on the slats. I would trace Belle's obsession with script to

the primacy of history in the Hebraic tradition, as embodied in the written record. Also, as an aside, it would be interesting to note that it was the speakers of the Semitic languages who created the first alphabet.

But Belle's should not be read as a search for an exclusive Jewish identity. Instead, she has been exploring the domain of contested identity politics. The secret language embodied in her work is, therefore, a multilogue constructed from the cryptic figures of ancient seals, Egyptian hieroglyphs and Hebrew, Latin and Arabic scripts. I would gauge that her intention is not to engage the viewer's attention in mechanically deciphering the individual scriptorial codes, but rather, in appreciating the existence of other lifeworlds through the metaphor of linguistic strangeness. After all, language is not a functional instrument, but a complex carrier of cultural signs and codes. The point is not whether these are real scripts or not, but that our engagement with the letters makes us understand the polymorphic realities that make and sustain various identities.

The notion that identity is not a primordial given (an emplasure), but an ongoing emplacement of the self, comes through strongly in the current exhibition, where Belle has juxtaposed abstract paintings of fossils made from diverse materials like oil, sand and powder with an anaesthetic crucible of test tubes linked to a clutch of slithering intravenous tubes. In 'From Fossils to Anonymity? Continuum?' Belle reflects on the tension between two different constructs of identity, the former as a fixed outcome of natural history and the latter as anonymous, manufactured through genetic intervention. But lest the viewer think that this reflects a universal debate of evolution versus genetic science, Belle shifts our focus to the ground beneath our feet. We stand on an ornamental pattern formed by the repetition of a single word that evades recognition. Belle has deliberately written the word 'identity' in Hebrew, to delay the Indian viewer from consuming the work instantly.

Like Belle, Navjot has explored the possibility of communication between different identities in her recent video installation and the inevitable breakdowns that occur when language stammers, letters separate and lose meaning or when meaning is reduced to form. 'Relational Sensibilities' is a layered video with a double superimposition presented on two video monitors. Monica, a student learning sign-language, enacts Navjot's personal narrative about identity politics by interpreting it through hand and facial gestures. Her hand gestures are superimposed on her performance and, in turn, both these images are overwritten by single letters that make up Navjot's narrative. As these letters dissolve, one by one, we feel impatient to read the whole narrative, our sight-lines dodging between the two monitors. Also, the speed of the film and the magnification of the performance is subtly varied between the two monitors, so that while one enactment takes place at the normal pace of nine minutes, the other one is run slower.

It is intriguing that Navjot deploys a specialised language – a code that belongs to a community marginalised by its disability – to express the condition of bewilderment that 'normal' people confront in intercultural experiences based on unfamiliar regional, religious or linguistic domains. In such situations, the assumption of language as 'normality' disappears and one is thrown back on the most expressive signs. Hand gestures take the place of words at the border where familiarity shades off into apparently irreconcilable cultural difference.

This is a process that Navjot understands intimately from her childhood which appears like a series of changing backdrops on her mindscreen. While she developed an ease for change in location from the age of three due to her father's transferable job in the Civil Defence Administration, her early exposure to cultural interdependence came from her mother, who passed on her compassionate understanding of the host culture to her children. What she carried from one place to another was neither a memory of a series of displacements nor a fixed identity of herself, but an attitude of releasing herself into another lifeworld through active emplacement.

Born into a Sikh family, Navjot was influenced by its receptive syncretistic tradition, which included a Sufi orientation towards universal love and tolerance. Thus, she did not feel out of place, even as an adult, when she consciously chose to collaborate with artists and practitioners from other disciplines, regions, classes or linguistic backgrounds.

Trained in the modernist art tradition at Bombay's Sir J.J. School of Art, Navjot gradually tired of the twin fixities – artist as genius and the autonomy of art – that ignored any direct social commitments. Her curiosity related to the sociology of art practice and its reception in the public sphere led her to make and display art in the 1970s, in public places such as labour camps and colleges. The nascent practice of Indian installation art in the 1990s gave her the freedom to explore issues of artistic collaboration and alter the conventional relationship between art-work and viewer. By the late 1990s, Navjot was interacting with artists of adivasi background at Shilpi Gram, Bastar, Central India, where she was concerned with the “problematic of collaboration, not its celebration”. In fact, the project began by “redefining the terminology of art/craft and artist/craftsperson in the context of Art History”. The project continues: the adivasi artists have made individual sculptures at the workshops facilitated by Navjot, while site-specific projects between her and her adivasi colleagues have resulted in cooperative works such as Pilla Gudis, temples for children, and the redesigning of public utility spaces for women at hand-pump sites.

Neither a user nor a do-gooder, Navjot has entered into a symbiotic relationship with the rural community and its environment and emplaced herself as artist-activist in the full awareness of the differences that are inherent in all such collaborations. Her recent video installation, ‘Relational Sensibilities’, echoes this appropriately, through the use of sign-language and the deliberate dismantling of the written script. “Can we develop a vision free of pre-assumptions and preconditioning?” she asks.

Stefania gives a different ring to the notion of displacement; at the age of 44, she has relocated 37 times. Her identity is made through active relocations. Born in Italy, she shifted to England at the age of 22, where she studied and worked as an artist, till 2001. Stefania's personal circumstances and the exigencies of the workshop/residency system turned her into a nomad. Her recent work ‘Drawn to the Edges’, 2003, functions like a mobile autobiography, mapping the routes she has taken – by country, town and road – from her birth to the present. Laid out on the ground, these personal cartographies on laminated paper appear as abstract family tree diagrams and route/root maps, in aerial view. Stefania has also gathered data about her life choices – age, education, cities and countries – and placed them alongside the route maps. But this nominal data, which may seem like a retrospective rationalisation of her movements through Europe, fills the viewer's mind with an uncanny sense of mystery. This invests the work with an aura, despite its austere documentary form; indeed, the elision of intimate details and causalities actually invites us to search for potential answers.

This cartographic archive of her life reminds me of 17th and 18th century Europeans who travelled for reasons of work, temperament or comfort from Hanover to England, Wales to Brittany, France to Ireland or Spain to Austria. The concept of inaccessible borders did not exist then, but with the hardening of the idea of a nation, the concepts of nationality and national sovereignty changed the way a border was defined. The borders that Stefania negotiates today are much more politically entrenched, but that does not deter her from being on the move and deliberately making works ‘abroad’, at residencies where she can emplace her self within the local adopted culture and participate in their socio-cultural issues. Home resides in relocation for her.

Across the gallery floor, Navjot has installed a diagonal boundary made from an iron pipe that shapes into an opening or a door on one side. We can see this as a metaphor of how artists negotiate borders, stopping, stepping over or going under the boundary line. Of course we must not forget that these displacements are only possible for people who can afford relocations: political, ecological and economic refugees all over the world have to confront real borders that displace their lives and livelihood. I am not trying to reduce art to life here, but only provide a caveat that artists have for long co-opted the term displacement as a politically correct device and shunted its realpolitik implications. It is now time to differentiate between voluntary and involuntary displacements and redefine the term, if artists wish to initiate a radical interface between art and progressive politics. Or do away with the term and look at emplacement as a possible anchoring of art on the move.

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