

title: domestication of visual pleasures
source: zeigam azizov

Domestication of Visual Pleasures is the title of a public conversation with Zeigam Azizov held at the Institute of International Visual Arts in November 22th, followed by a guided walk to the Geffrye Museum of English Domestic Interiors. This resulted from previous work realised at the museum, in which the artist and critic analysed the living room in relation to postcolonial theories of display and representation. He sketched a critique of modernism's project of perfection: 'The living room as a space of perfection is an idea of cultural revolution, developed from Schiller's work throughout Le Corbusier and Bauhaus' utopian architecture, until recent times. If you revolutionise your living room you don't need the social revolution!' This view of modernity has also led to its collapse, he argued, 'since its tendency is to exclude in order to seem perfect. This collapse happened because modernist theories ignored the possible ways of becoming'.

'What is a living room? Usually located in between public and private, it is an articulation of both. It articulates fantasy with utopia, social with symbolic. It is the space which is the sign of the prestige and interest. In his text *On Collecting Art and Culture*, James Clifford characterises how the collecting of art is about the formation of subjectivity. At the Geffrye Museum, the display shows this formation from the times of colonial conquest and collection of 'exotic' cultures until recent times . The living room started from the domestication of colonial and sexual fantasies and their visualisation in the space in between the public and private. In the Museum, we see first the living rooms that are the very prominent display of the living space of certain higher classes but progressively this distinction becomes blurred up to recent times when well to do businessman can afford to transform the warehouse into the loft space'.

pr We met a few times in the Geffrye Museum to discuss the politics of display and representation at use and we shared a common interest in that space. In your case, Zeigam, you were looking at the museum from the point of view of domestication of visual pleasures. I would like for you to start by explaining this approach to the museum.

za More precisely, I talked about the domestication of sexual and colonial fantasies in the living room. In fact the English word that is used is 'domestication'. 'Domestication' is a particular, ironically oriented terminology with reference to cultural theories which reflect the the collecting of others' cultures by the colonial society, that at the same time started domesticating them. The first reason why I named it this way has to do with the fantasy of consuming the other, that is at display in the Geffrye Museum. This started at the time of slavery and colonial travel with the bringing of images of the other from travels, in the form of statues, pictures and exotic furniture which was a privileged thing to do. The second reason has to do with the location of these ideas in this museum, the location of the idea of colonialism in a protestant society itself, with a protestant ethics that suspends the idea of pleasure. Pleasure is only allowed in this stage in which the pleasure is performed by the other.

This space of the museum refers to very different times and different spaces. Time space compression is a term that is very often referred in post modern theories of globalisation. David Harvey for example talks of obliteration of space and time. Time obliterates space and space obliterates time and this is precisely what happens at the Geffrye Museum. In my perception there is a very interesting moment, the critique of the beginning of globalisation from the perspective of domestic space. The Geffrye Museum is a film in real time. It runs in a very slow narrative from 16th century up to late 19th century rooms. From the 20th century forward it accelerates and changes much quicker through a smaller number of rooms. When it comes to the 20th century, the colonial relation changes, due to mass migration of the so-called exotic people whose cultures were previously brought to this country, while after World War II they came here and transformed themselves by acceptance of these living spaces.

pr Going back to the idea of travelling and collecting, how much does it shape and influence the living room?

za This colonial travel has completely altered not only the condition of the living room but of the whole society itself, and this is very visible in the Geffrye Museum. Travelling had two aspects: In the first place, there was the colonial travel by the very wealthy colonialists travelling to certain parts of the world and commissioning ethnographers to collect exotic objects which they brought back to London where they organised parties to show them. This is the formation of a new culture based on displaying the culture of the other. A very interesting text by James Clifford describes how the idea of collecting played an important role, not only by altering the living room but by fundamentally altering the idea of Western subjectivity. This started to define itself by collecting cultures from different societies, from the Indian, African and West Indies societies and bringing them together, trying to find connections.

pr In connection with this change, one can notice that from the 16th century through the Arts and Crafts to the Loft movements, there is a differentiation in terms of how the living room portrays not only class, but

also working conditions. In the museum, when one gets to the 1990s loft, there is a blurring between the work and living spaces.

za Yes, a text by Richard Hoggart 'The Uses of Literacy', says that working class didn't have a particularly good living room until the 1950s and the so called middle and upper classes did not have such specific changes happening in their living space. It all started after World War II, with the possibility of transformation of living conditions through work, culture, cultural work, and the creative industries. For some it was possible to change their living conditions through cultural work. Being an artist allowed some people to sell work and make some money to create a living space. It allowed some people to emancipate themselves from poor conditions, and this developed throughout the 20th Century. In the 1990s, the loft space indicates how the blurring of the distinctions between classes, started to happen, with a certain standardisation of living space in which domestic appliances such as radio or TV for example, are a common currency for all classes.

pr Another idea we discussed during our visits to the museum was the the idea of slavery. This appears particularly relevant in connection with the Geffrye's bequest as there is a certain amount of information that is encoded in the information panels. It is explained that Geffrye's wealth was based on the trade of goods between Africa and India but only by enquiring near the curatorial department did we find out that these goods were actually slaves. The museum was founded on a bequest from Robert Geffrye who invested money made with slave trade in philanthropy in East London.

za It is interesting in fact to find this recurrent relation to slavery, even these days when talking of working conditions and immaterial labour. Antonio Negri talks of the immaterial labour, of people producing culture in a way that is somehow the equivalent of the colonial slavery of colonial times. For example, there are still people that work almost 24 hours per day and receive little money. One difference is that now the word is used as a metaphor and there is little payment. Slaves were not paid at all and they had no right to housing but this condition continues until now. Another difference is that slavery was dominant in the more peripheral societies while now it exists in London society. My friend Angela McRobbie made a study on the working conditions in East London and she found that the dominant workforce are women that work in the fashion trade and they still make little money.

za Another circumstance that comes from classification is the brand ranking, I wanted to ask you how you think of this in relation to this work you are developing here.

pr Coming back to this notion of developing site-specific work and working located in this area of East London, something I found interesting was the connection with furniture, from its manufacture to its collection. The Geffrye museum brings forward the idea of a curatorial method, and the question of how to curate, administer and display a collection. In addition, living in a very globalised situation, I asked: what other kinds of collections one can find, for example online, and utilise the instant linkage that one can make between different types of data.

Still in connection to labour in East London in the 19th century something that happened was the first women-led boycott in 1888 and it was started with a socialist feminist thinker and writer called Annie Besant. When she found out about the working conditions of a group of women in East London she wrote an article in a paper called *The Link*. This article was a critique of a corporation called Bryant & May that was treating the work force in a very unpleasant way. So she made a call for a boycott, the boycott happened and there was a strike and at the same time because there was a development of new unions, that eventually led to the creation of the 'new unionism' and the Labour party. It was a very significant moment in the history of labour.

I was very interested in this story not only in terms of gender but also in the conditions of resistance and how one can look at the idea of boycott now. These days one has different tools to coordinate actions so I decided to invest some money to outsource Re.no to develop a bot that would combine the information available about brands and about boycotts in the same page in the internet. We called it *coyboott* just changing the ordering of letters in the word to reinforce the idea that a bot is being used as a form of automated labour. So that is what is in the computer now, working in the background. There are 100 avatars, identifying 100 top global brands. As a complement to this I am showing an archive of products manufactured by top UK cultural sponsors that are currently being boycotted on varied grounds.

z a Brand ranking is a semiotic activity, it is a sign that can be altered. That is why I started by talking in terms of classification. The brand is really opened to your critique: the logos say - you can play with me, you can change me, you can enter in conflict with me, but this type of critique is almost impossible in private spaces. Because private spaces do not have this status of critical spaces.

REFERENCES

- James Clifford(1988) 'On Collecting Art and Culture', in Clifford, James (1988) *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 215-251. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell 1989. Angela McRobbie (1997) 'A New Kind of Rag Trade?', in Ross, Andrew (ed.) *No Sweat : Fashion, Free Trade and The Rights Of Garment Workers*, London & NY: Verso, pp. 275-289. Richard Hoggart (1957) *The Uses of Literacy*, Chatto & Windus; reprinted Pelican, 1958.