

METRO PICTURES

Pigaet, Anael. "Alexandre Singh: The Memory of the World," *artpress* (February 2012): Cover, 46-51.

artpress 386 FÉVRIER 2012

art press

FÉVRIER 2012 BILINGUAL ENGLISH / FRENCH

ART CONTEMPORAIN JAPONAIS : DOSSIER
ALEXANDRE SINGH INTERVIEW
PERFORMA : FESTIVAL À NEW YORK
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Alexandre Singh The Memory of the World

Whether performing, sculpting or drawing, Alexandre Singh is a narrator. His work explores the world's memory, drawing inspiration from sources as diverse as Lovecraft, Molière, Gothic novels, TV programs and scientific research. No matter what the medium, writing is central. Sometimes he performs his texts, accompanied by images projected on the wall in an atmosphere mixing reality and fiction.

— Since 2008 Alexandre Singh has been making a series called *Assembly Instructions*, assemblages of images inspired by everything from the *Essays of Montaigne* to Ikea stores. These, too, are sometimes accompanied by performances. He also writes plays, like *The School of Objects Criticized* and *Dialogue of the Objects*. These two texts are presented in the form of highly theatricalized sound installations: objects set on pedestals carry out a dialogue that is sometimes serious and sometimes funny. The recorded voices of actors are played back, and the lightening emphasizes the liveliness of the dialog. Singh's work has been widely seen in the U.S. (especially in New York, at MoMA-PS1, the New Museum and White Columns), and more recently presented in Europe (Manifesta 8, Palais de Tokyo, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris). Born in 1980, this Franco-Englishman of Indian origin now lives in New York. With a slight British accent he explains how he conceives his pieces through witty and erudite associations.

Your work takes very varied forms, ranging from collage to performance. How did you come to be an artist?

First of all, I'm not sure that I'm there yet. Or maybe it happened by accident. I went to Oxford to study art, thinking that I'd end

up doing something else later on. When I was young I was very interested in creative fields such as music videos and advertizing. In fact, I still am. And then I realized that today, unlike the past, art makes it possible to work in various domains without too much constraint. That's why, for the moment, I make art. Plus I admire artists like Shakespeare, for example, who do everything, instead of just sticking to acting or playwriting. My work has been very influenced not only by Mozart's operas but also the films of Terry Gilliam and Woody Allen, TV series like *The West Wing* and cartoons like *South Park*. But probably my biggest influence has come from literature, especially writers who are masters of narrative invention such as Diderot, Potocki, Dante and Borges.

Writing is at the heart of your practice. Your Assembly Instructions (2008-2011) are often accompanied by texts, the installation The School of Objects Criticized (2010) was inspired by Molière's L'Ecole des femmes, and your novel The Marque of the Third Stripe (2008), about the life of Adidas founder Adi Dassler, takes the form of a Gothic novel with stories within stories.

Writing is an imaginary world. One of the things I find most motivating, and which doesn't get talked about much in contemporary art, is simply the pleasure of creating, of getting lost in that process. Often when you go very deeply into another world you realize that it's made up of hallucinations, like a dream, and that it sometimes calls up existential or social questions. Text is an essential element in the kind of theater and movies I like. Lots of artists are interested in writing, especially in regard to videos, but I find that even when the images are excellent the text and the acting are always much weaker. As for Gothic novels, it's like *A Thousand and One Nights*, a story that references the form that contains it, a procedure I'm very fond of. That's also the idea of sculpture.

For you writing and sculpture are closely linked.

In my performance *The Alkahest* (2009), I tell a series of intertwined stories. An overhead projector fills a room with a single color. One of this piece's themes is sculpture, a medium that's about the transformation of one form into another, one material into another, according to Green-



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berg's very narrative definition. God takes one of Adam's ribs to make Eve, Ovid does something similar with Dido and Aeneas, and then there's Goethe's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, reprised in Walt Disney's *Fantasia*. This performance involves golems and an alchemist who creates Alkahest, a liquid that can dissolve along with the cauldron that contains it. This is a very textual performance because I tell a story that lasts three and a half hours. The overhead projector is really no more than a campfire. It's very "anti-visual," and yet the world I create is very visual. Like a film script, the story is told in the third person and present tense. I'm fascinated by the analogy between alchemy and sculpture.

You started making Assembly Instructions in 2008. This series comprises found images that you cut up and glue together to make wall diagrams. They could be considered instructions for assembling the world.

Of course! This is a venture into an absurd attempt to produce a theory of everything. Rather than write an essay I wanted to sketch out a thought process. I'm interested in Montaigne's *Essays* where you see someone's thought unfolding through time. To the question of how a father should treat his son, Montaigne replies, "At first I thought such-and-such. I read Cicero who said such-and-such. I talked to someone in a tavern who told me such-and-such." This isn't argumentation or a dialectic, just very human, a little Socratic. That's a good analogy to my drawings. The underlying ideas in the *Assembly Instructions* are there to be completed. Some of them are simple and others more erudite. There's no hierarchization—that's the British aspect of my work.

Take my piece about Ikea. I spend a lot of time there because of my work (I buy a lot of their picture frames). These stores have the same layout in practically every coun-

try, especially when you get to the floor with a succession of model bedrooms. It made me think of Renaissance palaces of memory and mnemonics. Maybe all these stores were conceived as a conspiracy, a secret enterprise to preserve human knowledge, containing it all within these apparently arbitrary arrangements of duvets, toys, couches and bookcases that always hold the same 20 books in Swedish on their shelves? Or perhaps it's the world that serves as the index for the Ikea stores? If you changed the arrangement of these objects, would you change the order of the world, destroy or create realities without anyone noticing?

Very diverse associations of images, sometimes quotidian and at others historic, go into the making of the Assembly Instructions, from An Immodern Romanticism (2009 and Emotional Pornography (2008) to The Pledge (2011). Instead of computers, despite their virtues, you seem to prefer corkboards, paper, thumbtacks and black-and-white photos that allow a homogenization of images, just as the passage of time does with memories.

It seems to be that analogue procedures produce more elegant results than impressive digital effects. I like using collage to mix places and times to create a new reality. Black and white is useful in that regard; the only danger is that it might seem nostalgic. In a collage the addition of two elements produces something more than just their sum. It's very surrealist. My images, which come from the *Time-Life* encyclopedias or the Web (especially Flickr), are what dictate the project in an organic way. They aren't used to concretize an abstract idea but to go a little further.

Here's a sample of my associations. While watching *Sex and the City* I started thinking about Carrie Bradshaw's first name. In French, *carie* means a tooth with a cavity; the word punk comes from an Indian language (it meant a rotten tree trunk used as kindling); in the nineteenth century a "punk kid" meant an apprentice criminal; then in the 1970s nihilistic youth called themselves "punks" to mean dead inside. All that's very interesting anecdotally but not enough to be the subject of an artwork. In his *Impromptu de Versailles*, Molière responded to a criticism that he put "too much reportage" in his texts by saying that he shows more than he says. That's what's going on in the *Assembly Instructions*.

The Assembly Instructions are reminiscent, variously, of the way artworks were hung in nineteenth century Parisian Salons, structuralism and psychoanalytic free association.

That's true, and they also bring to mind the Flemish Renaissance—like Brueghel's images within images. Recently in Rome I saw Raphael's *The School of Athens*, where Zoroaster holds a star-studded globe and Plato's face is inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's. I'm really fascinated by intensity of details, like in esoteric diagrams and the Kabala. But the magician's magic is creates as much pathos as wonder, as Woody Allen so perfectly expresses, in my opinion.

Sometimes the Assembly Instructions are accompanied by a lecture-performance in which you, in the persona of an actor with a reassuring British accent, show images using an overhead projector, a piece of technology that's become almost obsolete nowadays. These performances are a little something extra, and yet more, and yet more... I'm not a believer, neither in Man nor God, nor in any absolute power of art. I like to play with things, change them, turn them upside down—nothing radical. Mozart and Shakespeare were inspired by their own

A gauche/déft: + Assembly Instructions (Emotional Pornography) ». 12 collages (encadrés).

12 framed xerox collages and dotted pencil lines

À-dessous/dessous: + Assembly Instructions Lecture (Ikka, Manzoni, Klein) ». Performance à White Columns, New York, 2009

works. Aristophanes rewrote *The Clouds* twice. When you add performance, visitors see the images differently this time. It's not an explanation, just another, even more hallucinatory way to see things. The speech rhythm is very important. I use the overhead projector because it's a simple way to show the images, a photocopy of the photocopy, in a way. But there's no nostalgic aestheticization of this technology.

*You were inspired by Molière for your School of Objects Criticized. It's a parody of him, transforming the play *L'École des femmes* into an exhibition about which objects hold a pretty freewheeling conversation. It's not very common today for artists to be into Molière. In the Paris metro you often see posters for several productions of his plays occurring the same evening, so I think Molière is still in the house in France!*

Humor is often a basic part of your work, even if it's often overlaid with melancholy. In Dialogue of the Objects for example, Lucky Strike and Marlboro Red, father and son, talk about death.

I think that about sums up all good art. Including that past master, Woody Allen.

In The School of Objects Criticized, a toaster, "abstract sculpture" and radio are set on pedestals like sculptures in an exhibition. An

incredible set of associations turns them into the wedding of Duchamp and Molière.

The fact that it's the objects who are talking adds a touch of humor and lightness, like the animals in La Fontaine's *Fables*. The conversation and lighting effects produce a dizzying sense of movement all by themselves. There's also a link between the function of these objects and the psychological profile of the character they represent. Serguei, the neo-post-Marxist bleach bottle who likes to pick up girls, confesses that he behaves like that because of the use-by date stamped on his ass that he'd prefer not to see. Once you know when you're going to die you're already dead.

What's your next project?

I'm working on the text for a piece in the style of Aristophanes called *The Humans* (there will be a choir, music and a trial; the humor will be simultaneously homespun and sophisticated). The stage is divided into a Dionysian world whose master is the rabbit Nesquik, and an Apollonian world run by the sculptor Charles Ray (God commissioned him to make human beings, who are neoclassical sculptures). There's a bit of Pinocchio in it, a tragic story about transformation and alchemy. A story about golems and Frankenstein, a universal model of our culture. ■

Translation, L-S Torgoff





