

GB11 Curatorial QA - Right To Opacity

Conversation between Michelle Wong, Doug Ashford, Amalia Pica, and Suki Seokyeong Kang

Michelle Wong: While abstraction may have been predominantly viewed from a Euro- and US-centric perspective as a way through which US influence was spread globally in an effort to curtail communist ideology and forms of social realism at the height of the Cold War, abstract artistic practices have in fact been results of and responses to specific cultural contexts and times. In contexts other than those of Europe and the US, abstraction is often a currency of circulation that is in dialogue with nationalism, cosmopolitanism, socio-political movements, institutional critique etc. To name a few examples: Vicente Manansala (1910–81, Macabebe/Manila) and Fernando Zóbel (1924–84, Manila/Rome) of the Philippines, Park Seo-Bo (b. 1931, Yecheon/Seoul) of South Korea, Gutai (founded 1954, Osaka) in Japan, Affandi (1907–90, Cirebon/Yogyakarta) in Indonesia, the Modern Literature and Art Association in Hong Kong (1958–64), and many more.

“The right to opacity” is borrowed from the late philosopher, writer, and poet Édouard Glissant (1928–2011, Sainte-Marie/Paris), who argued for opacity as necessary for colonized people to defy constant scrutinization and representation imposed by the colonizer. Strategies of abstraction in artistic practices, on the other hand, play a vital role in producing other kinds of space to maneuver through, in which possibilities otherwise unimaginable can be conjured up, even realized. Abstraction can also be deployed as a tool to defy, navigate, subvert, and zoom in and out of the mechanisms and bureaucracy that so often govern, condition, and control our activities as societal subjects. Is abstraction then a withdrawal (from the Latin *abstrahere*, to withdraw) of subjectivity and agency, or a form of subjective empowerment?

Doug Ashford: It is a complicated question, because just as there is a bright abstract response, it is generative also to think about a dark and limiting abstraction. I think there is also a sense of two kinds of withdrawal. I like the term “the right to opacity” because something that is opaque would not be withdrawn to the point of an elite and hermetic separation from you, from social life. But it would be present in a way in which it would accept the fact that it has to exist in some sense outside of the contextualization of the present, outside of time.

For it is not so much a withdrawal of subjectivity itself as a withdrawal of the assigned conditions of subjectivity. So one could be present in a way in which one could also be misrecognized. We know from aesthetic experiences of abstraction that a form could be present with us. We would be experiencing it in great specificity, particularly in relation to abstract painting – material, method, form, presentation, surface, all kinds of formal and

aesthetic decisions. But the way in which one would take on meaning would be, in a sense, open to our context. This is one of those situations where we are open to differentiations or undecidabilities in relationships to come.

One of the principles around earlier ideas of Western modernist abstraction is that we then have a certain kind of autonomy and relationship to subjectivity. The difficulty for me is that that autonomy often is one that works into already distinct ideas of the mutual. It becomes part of the power systems in terms of art history, or the ideological context of memorialization that we are talking about, or artistic and commodity value. I think there is a more concrete way to discuss this idea of control as a kind of right, and indeed the right to be misrecognized. It would be incremental to consider our sense of who we are as subjects, how we define ourselves as human or nonhuman, how we are positioned as a subject or an object in a relationship with a place, or the social dynamics of everyday life and its agency, as something that is then able to be redefined.

Amalia Pica: I was thinking about this idea of occupancy, or inhabiting abstraction, so that as you said it is not necessarily a withdrawal but an occupying of a space in which thought can be abstract. Thought is abstract and we sort of fill it in. But in that sense it could be a meeting point in which opinions are not yet made up, a place for subjectivity rather than the abstraction or subtraction of subjectivity.

Growing up as a Latin American artist, abstraction never seemed decontextualized to me, necessarily. Because a lot of the abstract painting and sculpture in Latin America was related to social practices. A better known example would be the Brazilians, such as the Lygias (as in Lygia Clark, 1920–88, Belo Horizonte/Rio De Janeiro) and the Oiticicas (as in Hélio Oiticica, 1937–80, Rio De Janeiro). How they would use abstraction in a way that always entered towards the social and was always a tool or a movement for social complicity, not necessarily in a specifically political sense, even though it was at different times. It was always a move towards the social. It wasn't an isolated entity. So the abstract art and designs would become things worn by a group of people, for example. Here abstraction is a possibility of extending a social narrative, rather than withdrawal.

Suki Seokyeong Kang: For me, subjectivity and agency are slowly suspended in abstraction. Subjectivity and agency arise from unbalanced contrast and uneasiness scattered in our surroundings. Then they concretize (or become visualized and visible) into shapes of abstraction. The visual form may seem like a reduction of subjectivity but it remains like a thin and transparent bone in the shape of abstraction.

MW: As our conversation goes along some notions of time have emerged. Whether it is a historical time, or a cultural time, or I would also argue a bodily time, as your projects all involve either yourselves as an actor or actual actors engaging with the work over a certain period of time. For example in Amalia's *Joy in Paperwork* with the laborious

stamping, photocopying, and filing, in Doug's work with actors repeatedly staging photographs while holding an abstract painting in the streets of Gwangju, and for Suki the dance by two actors with *Jeong* sculptures that revives and reenacts the ancient Korean musical notation of *Jeongganbo*. I wonder what are the temporal registers that you are either already aware of or are made aware of when making work?

SSK: I think multiple temporal registers are experienced in my work, as the sculptures fold and unfold, and people move back and forth through them. To me it is a spatial-temporal balance of restraint and spontaneity, void and abundance, allegorical figurations and their vestiges. My works are my attempts to reconcile dissonance and paradoxes into an integrated, visual whole.

Slowly thinking with awareness -> complicatedly intercrossing each other with narrative + materiality + performativity/action -> then to be simple.

AP: There was a moment when Doug said something about the impossibility to define the present. I think in inhabiting abstraction or abstract structures and defining them from there, there is the same inability to completely define the present moment. And this may be something that both Doug's and my work try to make linger, as a way of resisting monumentality and memorialization.

DA: I am not sure about the repetition. I am a little bit sure about the presence of labor, or the presence of work, in the sense that there is some factographic, experiential possibility in the way that interrupts the regime of false concrete abstractions, that we have to negotiate in terms of our relationships to power. I do not think this is simpleness. It is related to craft, but it is not as simple as craft or destruction. In the past, in the idea of the manual, in the hand, or the gesture of the hand, there was something cosmological in the way we identified with the potentially human affect of things we mold through labor. For me the idea that you are experiencing an object that someone else worked on means you are also experiencing or subjecting them in that process of production. If you think about the context of labor that produced them, it is about the projection of yourself into objects, and then the projection of objects into you, which is sustaining other people. I mean, it was one of the things that the socialist revolution supposedly brought along. The things we make become us, and the alienation between us and the productive context of industrialization would be overcome because we would be our occupation, like the Paris revolt in 1848. They named themselves what they did. We named ourselves what we did. The work became us.

AP: In this context it is also useful to think about the process of making something as a negotiation with what is possible. Let us consider an example from a formalist perspective, where you make something out of clay. There exist different constraints, such as how tall it can be before it falls, and how this material might or might not allow

for certain things. So you might have an idea that materializes through this process of negotiating, and it is no longer your idea but it is what you can make with that idea. So in that sense the things would be us, it would also be already what is possible, rather than just the utopian.

DA: And that is probably why the material and formal aspects of the production of things, at least within the realm of art production, is often already challenging us subjectively. Because if the thing is bigger than it should be, if it should fall over, if it doesn't fall over, then I also make an identification with that negotiation, that it would have an analogous experience of what something else could be, which I would have thought previously would have fallen over. And that could be a set of ideas, or a kind of a law, the way that I could look, or the way that I could be.

AP: And that is when I think the idea of the right of opacity is interesting because it refers not only to the possibility of things that we make, but also how the things that we think about making are being constantly redefined as we negotiate what is possible.

MW: There has been an outcry for transparency in politics, especially in Korea, but in other nations and regions too. In this particular socio-political context, as well as in the context of art, is transparency the opposite of opacity?

SSK: It is hard to address transparency as a form of existence. It seems to me that, when talking about degrees of transparency, we must be aware of the fact that things are seen as transparent, rather than being transparent. We can only see through the partial transparency of politics because we only come to know what is happening in politics through the depiction of mediators such as media as well as politicians. These mediators manipulate the levels of opacity – both of information and events – to make the transparency visible, so that they can be seen as transparent. But that is not total transparency. So opacity here is not the complete opposite of transparency, it is a mediator that makes transparency visible, and seen.

In my own practice, it is difficult to differentiate opacity from transparency. Again it is difficult to see them as complete and direct opposites. The word transparency reminds me of layers to tear through, like a wall with a shiny transparent surface that I can walk towards. Opacity to me is a visual volume that can be seen, which then can become in dialogue with layers of transparency to create a more complex volume of visibility.

For me my work is to tear through transparency, and through that process shape and bring into being an abstract form. This is what I mean by working through the volume of opacity through layers of transparency, to find the right visual context and form for both.

AP: Transparency and opacity are these large concepts and when we attach them to things the idea that they could maybe be opposites emerges. It is an interesting idea of a dialectic that can be a generative way of thinking about the world. Transparency can be offered as a way to oppose opacity but at the same time too they could go hand in hand, so that it is your relationship with these concepts that is constantly being defined. I think this is one of the possibilities of abstraction, that in a sense it is never totally defined.

I think this is something we need to recognize as attached to a context, especially when it is about assigning sides to formal concepts of transparency or opacity. You could say that something that is transparent has a lot of positive associations. But then when you start looking at the way that transparency works physically and architecturally in corporate environments, it can also generate opacity by pretending that there is no confusion.

DA: It's the disaster of the "we". When people say "we" when they mean "I". That is why I am attracted to this thread that we are expanding at GB11. Because if you are being opaque, you are understood as not being inviting or generous to others. But given the context in which the participants are in the framework, it is so linked now to the way we volunteer for our own slavery. Not only in terms of labor but also in terms of financialization, right? Like in the way the corporation has never been more transparent, and how rationalist ideas of societies continue to call for a transparent and logical negotiation of public life. But in a way that idea of transparency only further rationalizes the contexts in which citizenship is able to be assumed. And the idea of a certain kind of sovereignty of the people themselves, or life itself, gets put more and more to the margin, so this idea that something would be opaque or even like secret, or an adornment of a certain kind, seems to me more and more a way to radicalize the way that subjects are asked to function in the world.

One of the divisions that I have been carrying along in the studio recently has been to make the differentiation in terms of the affect of the abstraction, the dark abstraction such as the organization of the airport terminal, the idea of the bureaucratic abstraction of citizenship and place, or even just money itself. These seem to be real in the sense we treat them as existing instruments, we treat them almost in the linguistic sense as something that has an already defined meaning. But we know from language that the meaning is contingent upon cues, and in human time these things could change. So I guess what I am hoping for with the work that I am doing in Korea is that the interchangeability – that this painting could be anywhere, and the painting could stand for anything – becomes a way to create again. According to terms we are discussing, this could be a defiant use of abstraction that becomes an investment that reorganizes hope, or that reorganizes social imagination.

AP: I think that maybe hope is that the flipping mechanism you just start in a different way. So instead of starting through the discursive, or the descriptive, or with the contextualizing aspect of that image, it is by flipping the image that you are made to rethink the context.

DA: Very good. I'm with you.