

Personal encounters with Shah Jahan

By Denisse Vega de Santiago

When I first heard about writing a piece on the work of Bangladeshi artist Shah Jahan (1976-2015) I felt enthusiastic. Mainly because I have never heard about him before.

I visited the retrospective exhibition 'Shah Jahan: Personal Pop' at the Parts Project exhibition space in The Hague, The Netherlands on a day nobody else was there. I had Shah Jahan's art all by myself. After a nice conversation with Cees van den Burg, director of the foundation, I learned more about the artist's life and work. I learned Shah was someone very loved and had good friends who helped him all along the way. Cees also told me how he first became interested in Shah's work and how the adventurous long project of making a retrospective of Jahan's work came to be. I learned about Jahan's concern with the everyday life and the language of popular culture. I learned German artist Joseph Beuys' notion of "Everyone is an artist. Everyone possesses creative faculties that must be identified and developed" greatly influenced Jahan's work. I felt I knew Jahan a little bit, even before starting to explore his work.

Jahan's ideas about the transformative power of art resonated with me. How are all these ideas transmitted through his works? How is the social significance of art translated in his artworks? How does his concern with "everyone is an artist" work in his art?

As I started walking around the bright exhibition space, the first thing I noticed was the diversity of the materials: from large scale paintings, video, and collages to a Domino's Pizza box, Ferrero Rocher's wrapping paper, and a Bangladesh flag. In every material possible, Jahan seems to find a new medium waiting for creation.

Pizza Boys (2001), a monumental series of three self-portraits depicts Jahan in a Domino's Pizza's uniform in front of a white background (fig.1). Each of the three figures, which initially seem to be the same, present small variations in color, sunglasses and posture. They highlight Jahan's interest in the static/dynamic possibilities of painting. The monumentality of the piece, the intensity of the colors and the non-finished-like technique made apparent by paint drops caused a sense of freshness and energy. The same dynamic effect can be seen in Spin (1997), a series of black & white photographs depicting a festive sexual scene. (fig.2) The work encompasses 13 images in which, each of them, a young woman lies on a table and it is photographed having sex with different men. The images, which are photographs taken from a TV projection; like an analogue screenshot, a visual timeline evoking a sense of order and movement.

The force of Jahan's work is to be found in the way it makes evident the *subjectification of the creative process*. For example, in Pizza Boys, the figure's gaze does not directly confront the spectator triggering the imagination of the viewer by enhancing a sense of the self-creation of meaning throughout the perception of the paintings. After imagination is activated, the visitor can sense movement and dynamic energy by seeing the three figures and its subtle transformation at the same time. Soon, it seems as if the smiling paintings start dancing.

Jahan's "moving images" make the static/dynamic effect appears forcefully. However, it is only by our active engagement with the work that such effect appears. Shah Jahan' Personal Pop artworks succeed indeed in Beuys' notion of "everyone is an artist" by *making everyone* - who dares to engage with them - *to feel like an artist by provoking an interplay* between the human mind of the viewer and the artwork.

Art's social significance

There is a deeper layer in Jahan's personification of the human as artist. Earlier I posed the question: *how does Jahan's concern with the social significance of art "work" through his art?* I believe it is worth to be asked in the larger context of contemporary art. With the rise of global art history, it seems to be a return to the political artwork, to artistic activism. But how exactly this activism is to be found in the work of art? It seems that most of the time the answer lies in the political *content* of the artwork, a direct reference to social struggles. This does not necessarily constitute the social relevance of art.

As Canadian philosopher Brian Massumi argues, art is political in its own way. An art practice can be aesthetically political, inventive of new life potentials, of new potential forms of life, and have no overtly political content.¹ The question then is in how to find this "political way" of being of the contemporary artwork? The search of the political in art should not be focus on "what the artist tried to say with his artwork" but instead "on what the artwork has to say". By shifting this notion from the artist's intention to our own encounter with the artwork we became active participants in creating the political being of art: an "alive" being of art that does not live entirely in the materiality of the object of art but it is *enacted* in our dialogue with it.

Shah Jahan' Personal Pop resonates in the social discourse of contemporary art because it invite us to rethink the political in art. His work evokes what the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze called the "aesthetics of life", life as a work of art.² Deleuze argued that the human existence should not be understood as a subject but as a work of art. He urges us to seek for possibilities of life and subjectification that are artistic, to understand thought and imagination as artistry, beyond knowledge and power.³

Jahan's artwork succeed in being political precisely because it makes us sense alive. His work exposes the human capacity to think artfully, creatively, that is imagining possibilities for the other, for new ways of existing. Because if art is to have any social relevance, it is because it is going to change or activate something *within us*. This is just as the German poet Rainier Maria Rilke beautifully described his encounter with Apollo's torso, in which the sculpture comes to life and finally said to him: *You must change your life!*

References:

¹ Massumi, B. (2011). *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*, Cambridge: MIT Press

² Deleuze, G. (1995). *Negotiations, 1972-1990* New York: Columbia University Press.

³ Ibid.

Figures:

Fig. 1. Pizza Boy Nos. 2-4 (2001), gloss paint canvas of 300 x 240 cm.

Fig. 2. Spin (1997), C-print 71 x 101 cm.