

A FLAG

By Sophie Mak-Schram, 20th of April 2018

This paper is brief and bold in its claims in an attempt to respond to the spirit of Shah Jahan's artistic approach. Drawing on a broad range of heavy theory, it does not purport to be definitive, but instead to be a proposition.

Nationality, even in its hyphenated, prefaced, post scripted form, persists in the identification of artists. Whilst multiculturalism, alongside globalisation, struggles to sustain its illusion of inclusivity, national identities continue to be deployed as frames for cultural readings. When Shah Jahan blends Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys, should we talk about a particular set of German and American cultural collisions? Who or what, politically, is allowed to be international, transcultural or, even, global?

Pop art, and Warhol as its principal icon, is a particular cultural perspective. Long enshrined within art historical discourse as a period distinct in time and space (1950s New York City being its epicentre), it takes a particular position towards high culture, commodity and time. This position, where the mass appeal mattered more than the individual maker, is reinvested with the individual in Jahan's work. The pizza boy is icon of both the capitalist dream - convenience, branded, feeds your lack of leisure time! - and the persistent inequality it perpetuates, e.g. who feeds who, what is this brand of servitude?. The presence of the consumer, and its shadow, the producer, in pop art, lends the brash Domino's logo a more uncomfortable depth.

When Jahan brings Beuys into play, a transculturation occurs. By framing Warhol and Beuys, or pop and concept, as two roots of his practice, he complicates both the historical modes and the iconographical approaches we might take to his work. Warholian pop and Beuysian social sculpture are cleverly re-embedded into the contemporary cultural sphere, whilst Jahan's work simultaneously claims a particular, discordant genealogy for itself. Whilst genealogies tend to easily site directional influence, the interesting move Jahan's framing makes of these distinct practices is that these frames begin to demand a reciprocal interaction. Beuys' "Western Man" is expanded on, made culturally particular, and in doing so, questions how, when, or why, Beuys' installations became such comfortable presences in the art museum that we ceased to require an identified national or cultural identifier to read them through.

This transculturation of Warhol and Beuys is an a-temporal, a-spatial claim for artistic identity. Jahan's recourse to these distinct behemoths of Euro-American art calls for the viewer to place him in this canon of work that is social but not societally-specific, cultural but not culturally relative. This is a striking move not solely on the level of art historical influences, but also with regard to how it enables his work to function across the double bind of the personal and the artistic. A-temporal, a-spatial, but also temporally grounded

and spatially contested – again, the pizza boy comes to mind as a symbol of cosmopolitan capitalism but also the visibly invisible labour behind capital; racially particular yet universally branded.

It is *Untitled* (2003) that I would like to turn to, in order to explore this double bind further. The flag of Bangladesh is vertically framed, its top half covered in illegible scribbles. The red sun is smudged with seeming fragments of an address. This flag, an easy metonymy for its nation-state, is made into a graphic image. A red circle on a dark green background. On one side of the bind, the work can function as a pointedly cultural referent; Jahan's Bangladeshi background presented here as a partially defaced, illegible and yet aesthetic framed work. On the other, however, it functions as a denial of this pre-framed identity. The flag is an insufficient identifier should one not be well acquainted with national flags, and its refusal to fit within the literal frame it is hung in points to a temporary and partial visibility. What is left out of the frame but included in the artwork, the expanse of green unevenly framing the frame itself, demands the viewer to think about the further frames we then situate this work within.

The frames we are offered, and the content they contain, are far from neutral. A defaced flag in a white-walled gallery, a pizza boy painted onto cardboard – they enter into these spaces where a suspension of belief operates to allow the viewer to see cultural roots but not cultural imbalance. When *Untitled* (2003) reveals a specific tie to a nation, it also demands a presence beyond this identifier through its refusal to be reduced to particular Bangladeshi references. It plays with the icon, the pop art legibility of a flag, to point not only to the personal of the artist but also the socially constructed ease with which the viewer might consume such cultural differences as exotic or distant. The personal is not solely a source of references, but also a political claim staked out in a context where nation and race are often elided or essentialised.

This is not to say that Shah Jahan's body of work is about race or nation. Indeed, the very phrase "body of work" allows for a distinction between the artist as a person and the work as an entity. Instead, what my reading of *Untitled* (2003) seeks to provoke, is that the personal, political and pop are distinct but entwined positions that texture Jahan's work in a manner we must be attendant to. We must look *at* the pizza boy as well as *through* him as a symbol, and Jahan is both relevant and not to how we read his work. The double binds of Warhol and Beuys, the double bind of the hyphenated identity and the double binds at play within his work, all offer cogent propositions to how we might understand the paradox of the transcultural context of art.