

Yoga as Metaphor

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between-ness *noun*, the state of possessing two meanings
and neither of those meanings at the same time [author]


Thanks to globalization, I am surrounded in my daily life by a multitude of manufactured objects and appliances, some minor, others quite important, that have come from the most farflung corners of the world. Perhaps the only trait these objects share in common is that almost none of them bear any trace of their long journey, or even their diverse points of origin. Most, in fact, have been manufactured according to specifications set by multinational companies that are typically headquartered in those places where the finished goods will eventually be sold. Other than the fact that the end product bears a label saying 'Made in Sri Lanka,' we don't connect it in our imaginations to that spot on the globe, simply because nobody there made it according to an abiding sense of local identity. Ironically, for many people the only time in their daily lives that they are likely to come across the names Malaysia or El Salvador are on the labels of goods that bear no discernible trace of the place they were made.

We might compare this to a mere hundred years ago, when an object that had made the long voyage from distant Thailand or Peru might have been looked upon as a thing of wonder, or at least curiosity, because it would have served as a token from a world few knew anything about. Today, one might conceivably have learned as little (or less) about such cultures as our grandparents' generation, but our difference is twofold. On the one hand, while our dishcloths, garden hoses, and drink coasters are increasingly produced in such places, the collective urge to produce (and consume) things that *intentionally* convey some essence of the culture that produced them is slowly but irreversibly becoming consigned to the backwards historical flow of nostalgia and sentiment.

In its place, we have the current phenomena of globally competitive companies such as Nokia or LG, which maintain their edge against larger multinationals by servicing a worldwide customer base that seeks aspects of design, service, and pricing which are unconnected to any noticeable sign that the companies making these products are, respectively, Finnish or South Korean. This is not because successful businesses disguise their goods to appear less Scandinavian or less East Asian to the gullible customer. On the contrary, although such a thing as an LG plasma-screen TV or a Nokia cell phone unquestionably exists, the parallel category of 'Korean TV' or 'Finnish phone' is, by comparison, quite difficult to pin down, because, when it comes to product design, we no longer recognize national categories as especially meaningful alongside corporate identity. Consequently, whereas if somebody said a century ago that they had found something wonderful in Korea, they might have been referring to a bamboo dowry basket made by an artisan of National Treasure status, today they would almost certainly be referring to a high-end electronic component or appliance, bearing a temptingly mid-market price tag. The dowry baskets still exist, but they belong to an age when cultural difference, not similarity, was an 'exotic' country's most valuable export to a curious world.

Whereas most of the preceding points are common-sense observations that might be made by any casual observer of global trade patterns, a less obvious point is that our growing dissociation with cultural specificity works in the opposite direction. This why one of the two words in the title of this exhibition is 'yoga.' While the cultural roots of yoga are clearly and deeply entwined with India's specific historical narrative over centuries of social and philosophical transformation, such information is, today, largely irrelevant to the ways that yoga is practiced by a large percentage of the many millions of people who have daily (or at least regular) contact with it. This is neither a bad nor a good thing, but few would argue with the statement that whereas the word 'yoga' forty years ago might have triggered visions of barely-clad Hindu mystics in full lotus position, today one is more likely to think of Madonna hitting the yoga mat in between Kaballah sessions. Yoga, in short, has become a global commodity that nobody owns, which is why virtually anybody is free to invent any kind of fitness program they like, and then market it as 'suburban yoga' or 'bachelor yoga.' If someone decides to cobble together a routine of customized postures and stretches, and then claim that what they are doing is yoga, who can say that they are wrong, even if what they are doing clearly has nothing in common with yoga?

One would be fully justified in arguing -- particularly if one has traveled to India for in-depth study of a specified discipline with a known master -- that some branches of yoga are indeed more authentic to their roots than others, but such a distinction is precisely what no longer seems important, except of course for those few to whom it is extremely important. Those individuals who do learn and commit to a disciplined routine of yoga practice from a trained instructor, and are perhaps also conscious of the many distinctions between various camps of yoga, might be totally correct in claiming that Hatha or Ashtanga are precise categories involving standardized postures, but they would be less accurate if they were to claim that Hot Yoga or Power Yoga are not.



Considered in macro-perspective, yoga's effectiveness for its individual practitioners remains of far greater importance than its connection to any particular school, and such a prioritization does not seem misguided or opportunistic. Today, many people take up yoga through small town health centers, gyms, or YMCAs, or set out to develop a practice via video, book, or informal instruction. And because these benefits outweigh the question of whether or not its bona fides can stand up to scrutiny, classifications of yoga can come to seem arbitrary. Power yoga, hot yoga, Bikram yoga, Hatha, Ashtanga, Kriya, and all the other yoga schools and splinter groups possess together a cumulative weight that we can probably agree to refer to as 'yoga.' And yet this definition flies in the face of anything we know regarding the historical evolution of yoga as a culturally specific practice.

Or does it? The application of certain basic principles of between-ness might be helpful in this case, because of the peculiar semantic difficulties involved in rendering yoga both as a word that means something fairly specific, and as a word that can mean a number of different things depending on the circumstances. The particularly contemporary aspect of this dilemma lies in the fact that the two approaches to meaning not only do not cancel each other out, but they can even be said to reinforce each other. Yoga has become a malleable, fluid notion, one that flows freely between degrees of relative specificity, without ever giving cause to question whether or not one version of its meaning has the potential to cancel out any of the others.

To take the argument a step further, we can observe that the past half-century has witnessed a dramatic change in how spiritual practices that evolved in different regions of Asia have become the subject of intense interest throughout the world. From the fervent embrace of Zen and other forms of Buddhism by Western artists and intellectuals in the 1950s, to the worldwide explosion of yoga and meditation as practices that now transcend all geopolitical boundaries, the rapid global expansion of Asian-based philosophical thought brings with it a complicated burden of post-colonial guilt, millennial anxiety, and capitalist opportunism. Even so, some of the most striking differences between the past and the near future lie in the area of accommodation – whereas Christianity prospered by forcing its beliefs on subjugated populations, Yoga and Zen are the spiritual calling-cards of the emergent global bourgeoisie, who embrace Eastern practices and world-views as an essential part of their new hybrid identity: citizens of a larger world.

As these broad social changes unfold before our eyes, the underlying structure of rational thought is itself changing shape. Our largely dormant capacity to imagine productive thought occurring outside of binary dualisms is not just an occasional impediment to creativity per se – it has subtly but unmistakably governed our way of perceiving and interacting with the outside world. However, with Western civilization loosening its hegemonic grip on the rest of the planet, the power of the binary over our shared humanity shows corresponding signs of crumbling. 'Them' is a useful category only when we possess an equally sharp notion of who 'us' is. Otherwise, we are all just 'us,' in a confusing and sloppy way, and there is nothing else. The unquestioned definition of 'them' used to be vitally

important to the colonization of vast chunks of the planet by other, smaller chunks, just as it defined the history of modern warfare up through the end of the Cold War. In dialectical terms, the fall of the Berlin Wall was more like the sudden sinking of an enormous sea vessel, creating a vortex in its wake, into which the supporting myth -- of two vast empires, butting up against each other like bulls -- also disappeared with barely a trace. Enemies and allies, good and evil -- today they all shift about on unstable supports, more relativized with each passing attempt to revert back to the outmoded binary codes that provided the support for our earlier, more simplified, system.

The 'Dirty' part of Dirty Yoga is quite a different matter altogether. Although the most frequent use of the word dirty still refers to a temporary state -- one in which a good cleanup is called for --, today it remains so closely tied to the ideal of nature that it no longer conveys the stigma one associates with more extreme variations on the word (i.e., filthy). In fact, as medical advances have sharply eased the dangers attributable to improper hygiene, the Protestant ideal of cleanliness as godliness has also receded to the background of Western civilization's operating myths, and an inviting aura of ambiguity now surrounds the way that 'dirty' is generally employed.

Prior to World War I, this ambiguous nature of 'dirty' would have been unthinkable, as societal belief in the progressive aspects of technology and industrial production was still nearly universal, and it was necessary to keep the home and workplace clean and orderly if things were to run smoothly. But in the war's aftermath, a collective doubt began to make itself felt over the increasing capacity of mankind to destroy itself. The end of World War II, especially the atomic weapons dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, added to this expanding repertoire of fears a general knowledge that we could take the rest of the planet with us. The long-distance race to separate our society from that of our agrarian forebears turns out to be far less simple than had been supposed.

'Dirty,' in its pre-WWII slang context, was frequently used to refer to someone as a member of an inferior race. If one occupies a position of superior technology, wealth and/or force, describing another as *dirty*, in the sense of being in obvious need of a good bath and a change of clothes, suggests a vast weight of moral judgment. In a sense, it implies that its target has only recently emerged from the swamp/jungle/ desert, and doesn't know well enough to leave his uncivilized habits and values behind. By implication, the object of one's derision lacks the essential values of modern civilization -- an essential failure if the speaker's ultimate goal is to justify a good 'cleansing' by means of colonization and war.

The 1960s cultural revolution, particularly the general loosening of sexual mores and a growing popular interest in ecology, also resulted in a fundamental shift in the cultural meanings of dirt. This shift is best seen in the 1970 documentary film *Woodstock*, which in its attempts to communicate the essence of the previous summer's rock festival, made the collective joy of grown-ups romping in the mud one of its most enduring images. With a growing number of people deciding to reject meats and processed foods, and the ensuing boom in organic food and

other means of 'going back to nature,' dirt quickly metamorphosed into something good – a humble symbol for the earth's plentitude and bounty. Mud-baths grew dramatically in popularity (along with water-beds), and blues guitarists were said to be at the peak of their artistry only when they got 'down and dirty.'

Thirty years on, the rehabilitation of dirty was largely complete. In the 1990s, 'dirty dancing' became shorthand for a sexually suggestive mode of gyrating one's hips that was a blatant imitation of professional strippers. A 'dirty martini' was a drink whose suggestive murkiness – in contrast to the crystal clarity of its 'classic' cousin -- might resemble a glass of water drawn from the Mississippi River. The main residue of dirty's power to wound and chastise is in its connection to sex, or, more specifically, porn. Sexually explicit films are still called 'dirty movies' and a retired gentleman with a lecherous streak is invariably labeled a 'dirty old man'. But even this last epithet has been rendered harmless by the non-threatening persona of the recently deceased rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard, whose affable music let it be known that 'dirty's cultural evolution as one of the hippest of aspirations was complete.

Probably the most glaringly obvious characteristic to risk pointing out about Dirty Yoga at this stage is that it doesn't actually exist. Try as one might, it is impossible to locate any school, spa, or recreation center that offers anything remotely like Dirty Yoga. Even so, it is not difficult at all to imagine what Dirty Yoga might be, since we already have such precedents as Dirty Dancing and Hot Yoga. One envisions a Kama Sutra-type set of exercises, designed to open up the pelvic region for greater flexibility; or perhaps a couples-only form of erotic horseplay, in which stretching and controlled breathing take the place of more conventional arousal techniques. Each of these scenarios is essentially the same, in that each points to a yoga that has been invented in order to fill a presumed niche market. What deserves emphasis here is that the leap from something that clearly does not exist to something that might, in fact, come into existence at any moment is in fact a very small one, and it is on this point that the discussion quite naturally turns to the somewhat more specific problems of art.

Artists who have attempted to explore the multiple forms of collective identity available in our increasingly globalized society often find themselves at the cusp of another broad cultural transformation: that of art as advanced social communication, with all the inherent potential for ambiguity, misunderstandings, and slippage that comes along with our attempts to understand and exchange ideas with each other. Because the basis for artistic meaning in most trans-identity art is also subject to flux, it does not always resemble the forms of art that are quickly validated by the marketplace. As a result, most of what today passes for connoisseurship in contemporary art is rarely more than a thin disguised rehash of outmoded guidelines and values that downplay innovation in favor of continuity.

Rather than embrace the entirety of global artistic change as a single, albeit multi-vocal, event, conservative quarters of the art world continue to manipulate categories like 'American art' or 'Chinese art' as if their juxtaposition still carried with it some intrinsic meaning or property. Quite the opposite is true: the very fact that we refer to other

countries' art (or our own) in such sweeping terms is because new art, and our appreciation of it, have become entirely de-centered phenomena, with the effort to connect art with viewers beyond the boundaries of the artist's culture gradually becoming a collective struggle to craft artistic values that show indications of intrinsic universality. Rather than being formulated in one place according to a local set of needs, the digitalization of all visual information makes it possible today for such principles to develop in multiple locations at once, limited only by the capacity of artists to adapt farflung ideas to their particular studio practices. Simple cross-cultural hybridization, which has been occurring for centuries, is slowly being replaced by a world in which all cultural definitions form part of an infinite menu of aesthetic choices, all more or less interchangeable.

Today, an artist's work can no more be said to 'represent' his or her culture than a cell phone or hand towel 'represents' the society that produced it. For example, the notion that American art contains an inherent, unique capacity to expose the viewer to insights regarding the American experience has begun to function as a kind of exoticism in reverse. The very worst aspects of the American temperament, examined from the gimlet-eyed perspective of those artists who make a point of mocking or inverting the tropes of patriarchy and imperialism, seem to make for impressive trophies to adorn the walls of those art patrons whose habit it is to scorn U.S. foreign policy as anathema to civilized discourse. In the meantime, the marketplace is rigged to systematically exclude those artists who have not yet located a suitable international interlocutor, or who do not otherwise uphold the values of a market whose primary function is to undergird and reinforce the tastes of the very rich and/or the very powerful.

In the meantime, the seeds of a fully globalized mode of artistic discourse, sown at the cusp of the 1990s, have taken secure root following a geographical pattern defined loosely by post-Cold War fault-lines of political power. Europe is in ascendancy, although it is a continent rendered anew by the artistic vibrancy of countries that formerly occupied its margins, and beyond. Turkey, Bosnia, Greece, Poland, Portugal and Sweden, to name a handful whose art scenes have recently gained increased international prominence, are now as much a part of this new equation as France, Britain and Germany. Brazil leads South America in artistic terms, as South Africa continues to lead Africa, both countries marked by the specifically twenty-first century challenges of integrating old and new European and American cultural values, while remaining free to re-invent themselves according to their specific polyglot histories and newfound regional clout.

Even the U.S. and Western Europe, final abiders in all long-term transactions bearing the name 'art,' are dramatically different places than they were only ten years ago, exuding a slow but unmistakable shift toward recognizing a market in which the other three-quarters of the world has some degree of representation. A cursory review of the list of participating artists in this exhibition, for example, might suggest that Berlin is quickly becoming the artistic melting-pot of Europe (and perhaps the world), or that an increasing number of promising artists in the U.S. are of foreign parentage. Add to these observations the more broadly based phenomena of artists studying abroad, ex-

hibiting abroad, and otherwise inserting themselves into cultural landscapes in which they are nomadic presences, and a case begins to build for globalism having the potential to make as profound a cultural impact on the art of the most technologized societies as it has had thus far on those countries that have fought hardest to level the playing field in terms of global trade and the access to political and cultural influence which it facilitates.

China and India are, of course, the newest, largest and most impressive stars in the firmament, although it is still relatively rare to locate artists in either country who express much enthusiasm regarding their respective national cultural policies. India is still in the process of developing a cultural policy for the visual arts that aspires to be more than a warmed-over version of European models, while China seems committed to the goal of building at least one of every conceivable kind of cultural institution as quickly as possible, perhaps as a form of free-market experiment in which various groups compete for support by trying to stay viable in the eye of an increasingly sophisticated public. Nonetheless, the artists of both countries have gained dramatically by the overall success of their national economic policies, resulting in a noticeable compatible growth in the market for their contemporary art.

In true globalist fashion, this current surge in non-Western collecting, which once might have been limited to the two countries themselves (plus other countries with large Indian and Chinese communities) is demonstrably worldwide in its impact, most notably with respect to new Chinese painting. For the purposes of this discussion, however, it is sufficient to note that the two countries straddling the Asian continent, and perhaps to suggest that not enough attention has been given to the ongoing development of new, specifically Asian, institutions, initiatives, and paradigms for making, presenting, and sharing new artistic development. Whether such a development is in fact taking place now, or is still on the verge of happening, is a point that might be subject to debate, but what seems indisputably true is that the current flow of the artistic tide – from artists in Asia towards collectors and institutions in the West – is only the first in a series of larger transformations that will eventually see the tide flowing in both directions at once.

When, or perhaps most critically, how, this series of developments will unfold is anything but certain, although the indications are already fairly abundant, depending on how one is inclined to interpret them. For instance, the fact that Asia is now the pre-eminent location for biennials, despite the fact that the longest-running editions – Taipei and Gwangju – sprung into existence a scant ten years ago, is an oft-noted fact. What is equally conspicuous, though entirely through its absence, is the apparent lack of any serious initiative to replicate art-fair culture in Asia. This comes at a historical moment when many commentators are trumpeting the alleged end of the biennial area, along with the corresponding rise of a brand new era, to be dominated by art fairs and their travelling circus of well-heeled tastemakers.

Another, possibly unrelated, sign seems to be the apparent resistance on the part of some of the most prominent Chinese artists working today – Feng Mengbo, Cai Guo Qiang, and Xu Bing come first to mind – to letting themselves be represented by a commercial gallery. Far from showing a lack of ambition, such reluctance might possibly emerge from an unspoken belief that the gallery system, as it currently functions, represents an antiquated and increasingly obsolete structure. Rather than commit to something that may soon have run its course, perhaps these artists are simply holding back in order to see what comes along to replace it.

It is in this hypothetical spirit of engrained experimentation that the title *Dirty Yoga*, and its relevance to contemporary art practice, is probably best understood. Unconstrained by past definitions of identity that have been deeply rooted in nationalistic constructions of a collective self, the contemporary artist moves instead between unrelated places and contexts, all the time being called upon to derive some overriding sense from the prismatic conditions of global experience. The biennial, which is still the standard for interweaving regional and international art contexts within a single exhibition framework, is first and foremost an opportunity to observe the most singular qualities of the era in which we live, by way of the art that this era has produced.

And yet, if we cannot be as confident as we once were in ascribing certain essential properties to categories such as “Japanese art” or “German painting,” from where do we derive the basis for ascribing collective properties to any groups of artists? On what basis, in other words, can we say that a photographer working in Brazil, and another photographer based in Korea, and a third photographer living in India, and a fourth photographer in the U.S., share certain key stylistic points of departure, when in fact it seems that none of the four is more than remotely aware of each other’s work?

The fundamental problem seems to lie in the fact that most of us continue to subscribe, consciously or not, to the aforementioned dialectical framing of virtually all arguments, so that the discursive distance between what we might categorize as ‘national’ or ‘regional’ tendencies, and the global dynamic that propels most interesting art today, is not really as great as might be suspected. In fact, so many artists today automatically understand their work in terms of both local and international standards that any special emphasis on the difference between the two points of reference seems increasingly misplaced. It is no longer enough to say that an artist’s work helps provide a window into a culture that might once have seemed remote or exotic to us, because that same work might enable local viewers to detect cultural positions that outsiders would not recognize, or it may express a degree of ambivalence over how non-locals view that same culture. The era when we expected artists to stay in one place, to identify completely with their home culture, and to enable those outside that culture to have a glimpse of the ‘authentic’ life inside, is, thankfully, already a part of the receding past.

The burgeoning new era, in which artistic meanings are gradually generated by a multitude of contingencies -- including race, economics, politics, spirituality, youth culture, technology, sexual identity, and language -- might still be in its formative stages, but it is already distinct enough from the nationalist-derived legacies of modernism that very few of the accepted twentieth-century standards for evaluating the artistic worth of a particular creation can still be said to apply with much force to artworks made today. Even such formal attributes as shape, color, and composition have shed their mostly abstract legacies and been absorbed into complex equations of conditional meanings that require more than just a single cultural frame of reference to understand.

Indeed, there may still be only one contemporary art idiom that makes sense for our age, just as there was for the School of Paris and, later, the New York School. The major difference, however, is that today, this idiom is no longer the exclusive domain of any particular set of authorities. Rather, it is being forged through a multitude of forces, some obvious and others quite hidden, that have enabled countries such as South Africa, Thailand, and Brazil to develop artists of world-class stature without ever having to conform to the esthetic standards of a distant capital. Whereas it might be foolish in the extreme to attempt to predict which direction this tendency is headed, there should be little doubt in the minds of any readers or viewers that the era of national artistic hegemony -- like the vision of yoga as an unadulterated cultural product of India -- is not simply past, it has become unsustainable in the present, and is likely to become even more so during what lies ahead.

(Dan Cameron:Curator, 2006 Taipei Biennial)