

## More words for 'A Hundred Seas Rising' Jenny Walden

*"Asked why he chose to focus on artists in his documentary, Lange responded, "I think artists start to reflect early on social issues... it is interesting to see what comes out of confusion." <sup>1</sup>*

To write about art works is difficult. It is difficult to let the art breathe through the writing. Perhaps this is not admitted often enough in the many writings about art. For me the discourse is important. For me something that might be considered theoretical is important, but why the addition of more words now?

I agree with Simon Critchley, an enthusiastic contemporary writer about art, (*or more exactly he is an interlocutor and fellow practitioner within the 'work's' orbit*) when he states:

*Broadly, I see the relation between art and theory as dialectical: art needs a theory that needs art. I don't see art as standing alone or as being for its own sake...The act of elucidation, of reflection, of conceptualization, is essential. All art is conceptual, we might say. But art is not simply conceptual and the concept should not exhaust the percept.... It shows the concept's need for a moment of sensuality or, better, spatiality, which stands apart from the concept. Art needs a theory that needs art. It's a two way street with all the traffic in the middle"<sup>2</sup>*

So in this writing, I am cautious, both excited (in the sense of alert and 'stirred'), and apprehensive about my approach, just as I am perhaps when encountering the work for the first time.

Is this a dialectical relation between excitement and apprehension: excitement needs an apprehension that needs excitement?

Critchley says something else that is apposite when it comes to this work here:

*"...perhaps [art and theory have] both become attached to a third term...together collectively around a third term...an obvious third term here...is...**the political**..."<sup>3</sup>*

Certainly this cannot mean art attached to a 'project' to somehow 'illustrate' or give 'aesthetic dressing' to 'the political' that has happened somewhere else?

I want to suggest that *A Hundred Seas Rising* by Suki Chan is political in a way that perhaps you would not expect me to say.

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<sup>1</sup> From the website Egypt Independent: Art and Revolution, revisited in two new documentaries: <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/art-and-revolution-revisited-two-new-documentaries> April 2012

<sup>2</sup> Critchley, S, *The Infinite Demand of Art*  
<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v3n2/critchley.php>  
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<sup>3</sup> Critchley, S, *The Infinite Demand of Art*  
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*A Hundred Seas Rising* is a work that is political in the *experience* of it.

When I think of the political as an experience I do go back to the Ancient Greek sense of the polis as a space and place for the coming together, 'the gathering of individuals for the sake of seeking a common good and a community of just 'ends'. Yet, importantly, this is the polis as a certain dynamic and duration in the tying and untying of a 'community of difference', of togetherness *without dissolving* limits and resistances...like a hundred seas rising.

Here is Simon Critchley again:

"... [Art] has become a key space in culture for the thinking through of the nature, the possibility, the limitations, and most importantly, the memory of resistance."<sup>4</sup>

For me, here, with *A Hundred Seas Rising* around me, this 'thinking through' is a *material working through*. I might say, in this instance, the attention of the work to individual words, individual voices, and the gathering of sounds, the space, the objects in the space, the relationship between the particular nature of the installed school room with its memories of order, chaos, and indeed resistance, in and towards the literally resonating and stirring but importantly, not simply startling, rise of sound and then its fall, are the material factors of the political (as in our polis) experience of the work.

I have recently been discussing art and experience with a fellow writer friend. Experience has become a feature of art's practice and its institutions recently, with much store being set by notions of 'experience' for the spectator, to which museums and galleries must attend. That great 20<sup>th</sup> century thinker of experience, Walter Benjamin was cautious about experience, both excited and apprehensive, I might say. Alert to the possibilities and the 'dangers' of experience. Benjamin was mindful of two kinds of experience; the immediate or 'startling' experience of the 'event' that characterized the modern urban world and its modes of 'expressing' collective identity and experience understood as gathered even if minutely over duration and space that was the mark of reflection and memory.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst for Benjamin, the first type effected momentary excitation; it was a finite and transitory experience unable to provide time and space for thought and reflection or an inkling of the circumstances that actually shape the experience. It was a type of experience in which people might find their 'expression' but nothing else. The second type of experience was lasting (had duration) and 'infinite' in the sense that it opened to the before and after, giving room for knowledge and recollection again: an experience that Martin Jay elucidates as "involving...a potential learning process

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<sup>4</sup> Critchley, S, *The Infinite Demand of Art*  
<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v3n2/critchley.php>  
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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, Walter, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Benjamin, W., *Illuminations* Translated by Zohn, Harry, 219-253.London: Jonathan Cape, 1970

produced by an encounter with something new, an obstacle or a challenge that moves the subject beyond where it began...<sup>6</sup>

It is the latter experience that *A Hundred Seas Rising* provides, in its material politics.

The experience of *A Hundred Seas Rising* is not instantaneous and is not one-dimensional. It is multi-faceted; it provides what Benjamin identified as the production of experience as a reflective encounter, as against and counter to the *reproduction* of experience as a mere repeat of the illusion of meaningful experience. As such, as above, it is also an experience akin to the polis; a gathering of dynamic durations and resistances.

That is a good 'memory of resistance' in a material and an ideational sense; a physical memory in the duration and sculpting of sound, resisting easy assimilation and a gathering of statements of resistance whether memories *of* the past or memories *for* the future.

We are thus, with this work, in a very particular sense in the midst of a new 'polis', and attached to our third term: the political.

Acknowledgement to Dr Juliet Steyn who is currently writing on the subject of Art and Experience and has rekindled and inspired aspects of my thinking here.

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<sup>6</sup> Jay, Martin *Songs of Experience: modern American and European Variations on a universal theme* Berkley USA University of California Press 2005