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Roy Villevoeye's Art of Exchange

Since a significant part of Roy Villevoeye's oeuvre consists of photos and videos featuring Papuan villagers, it is vulnerable to the charge of neo-colonial exploitation. But although Villevoeye enlists the cooperation of Papuans to produce artistic commodities that enable him to survive as an artist in the West, his art does not gloss over the economic discrepancy between him and the people he visits and depicts. On the contrary, it reflects continually on the complex interaction and interpenetration of two cultures which are also two very different economies, and on the inevitable frictions and dilemmas that accompany the production of the work. In what can be seen as part of the 'relational' or social turn of art in the 1990s, Villevoeye moved from painting to a performative practice that foregrounded the social and economic structures from which the work emerges with rarely seen candour. Rather than creating situations of seemingly carefree sociability under highly controlled (art-world) circumstances, Villevoeye developed an art of exchange with people (and peoples) with whom relations are necessarily fraught with asymmetries and inequalities.

A crucial work in Villevoeye's oeuvre is *Kó* (Showing Primary Colours in Kombai), 1995/96, consisting of three photos, each of which shows a frontal image of two black men in the jungle together holding up a sheet of paper. The paper has a different colour in each photo; the three colours are those used (together with black) in colour printing: cyan, yellow and magenta. The men are Kombai, one of the tribes that inhabit Papua, the Indonesian part of New Guinea that was formerly known as Irian Jaya. The monochrome colour-fields in *Kó* recall Villevoeye's background in painting and his critical dialogue with modernism. In the early nineties, he started deconstructing the modernist claims of universality by contrasting primary colours with different skin colours. *Kó*, too, is a reflection on modernism. The colours in question are not Mondrian's primary colours – red, yellow and blue – but those of colour printing: the modernist holy trinity of pure colours is replaced by the variant used in the world of mechanical reproduction. Moreover, the large version of the *Kó* triptych is executed in the form of a computer print on vinyl, consisting of countless small, irregular cyan, yellow, magenta and black dots: this industrial pointillism reminds us that historical Pointillism and its 'scientific' use of optical mixing already strove for a pseudo-industrial efficiency.[1]

Besides modernist and industrial uses of colour, a third, radically different approach to colour is present in *Kó*. The language of the Asmat, the tribe with whom Villevoeye usually stays on Papua, does not have an exact equivalent of our concept of colour. In their language, *Kó* stands for 'the extent to which things glint, gleam, shine, show, glow, blush or, for example, bloom' and thus distinguish themselves from their surroundings.[2] The Papuan perspective represented in the title thus adds an element to the work, but the photos themselves are obviously taken by a Western artist. The images recall above all the uncompromisingly frontal poses of some forms of early anthropological, colonial photography.[3] In this way Villevoeye acknowledges his dominant position as a visiting artist from a wealthy European country. The reference to colonial photography is itself enough to counter the romanticization of New Guinea as a pristine paradise where people 'still live in the Stone Age', but this is reinforced by the sheets of paper, which are clearly not part of traditional Papuan culture. While Papuan culture may not necessarily be localized in the same present as Western culture, Villevoeye leaves no doubt that the anachronistic clash of different temporalities in his work is not one of the modern West against the Stone Age.

Rather, it is a montage of two contemporary cultures, two contemporary economies, of which one is dominant and hence in practice normative.

Cargo cult

The photo *Presents Ready to Be Given Away* (1999) is a contemporary still-life which depicts a variety of objects Villevoys has brought to give to the Asmat people in New Guinea, spread out on the floor of a hotel. The things range from hooks and knives to Unox caps and T-shirts imprinted with sci-fi aliens. The Asmat are so far outside the 'global' economy that even companies like IKEA and their front men have not yet discovered it on their quest for the cheapest possible workers with the least possible rights. Currency is generated there primarily through wood carving (shields, masks etc.) for Western collectors. Villevoys inserts his practice into this economy; the 'presents' are in fact part of a system of barter. Although the Asmat sometimes accept currency, payment in kind is often preferred because of the distance they have to travel in order to spend the money. The Asmat thus receive things that are useful to them and which are considered desirable in their society, even if to our eyes they may not seem much more than a contemporary version of beads and mirrors. Sometimes Villevoys gives them strange gifts of a different kind, such as the pieces of coloured paper, which function as props in his art.

Modern culture was marked by the romanticization of traditional, 'primitive' societies. Modernity is abstraction: capitalism extracts people from their traditional social bonds and integrates them into a market where the bonds are predominantly abstract-monetary. This permanent decoding and deterritorialization led to an idealization of societies that had ostensibly escaped this process. In the economic version of this discourse, such societies are contrasted with capitalist modernity as gift economies. Marcel Mauss in hand, Bataille compared the modern cult of production unfavourably to the sacrifices and exorbitant gifts of traditional societies, and Jean Baudrillard used elements from Bataille and Situationist theory to arrive at an analysis that contrasts the reduction of everything to exchange value and sign value in capitalism contrasts with 'primitive' cultures of the 'symbolic exchange'. [4] Symbolic exchange is based on a network of social relations in which the dead play a central part. The circulation of commodities in capitalism is based on a repression of death, which has become possible through the wall that monotheism has erected between the living and the dead; by contrast, the dead are an integral part of society in tribal cultures. In initiation rituals, young people die symbolically, to be reborn as adults. They thus circulate between the living and the dead, thereby forming the foundation of a regime in which the circulation of objects is tied to social and religious obligations towards the living as well as the dead – the ancestors, who are at least as real as the living. Such obligations are lacking in capitalism, in which the circulation of commodities is regulated by abstract market mechanisms rather than concrete social and religious bonds.

In the importance he ascribes to the role of the dead, Baudrillard is indebted to late nineteenth-century authors such as Herbert Spencer and E.B. Tylor: 'primitive' societies with ancestor cults seemed to make possible a reconstruction of the origin of mythology. Gods were held to have emerged at a later stage from the belief in ancestral spirits, which was still preserved in certain tribal societies. In the context of the primitivist quest for origins, such societies came to be considered more representative of 'the mythical' than the more developed mythology of the Ancient Greeks. [5] According to Tylor, a 'wild' culture like that of the Papuans was a survival from the earliest phase of the development of mankind; New Guinea accordingly entered Western mythology as 'the country where people still live in the Stone Age'. [6] The question of how much may be deduced from such a culture about the beginnings of civilization remains a hotly contested one, but it must be emphasized that Papuan

culture is clearly not a prehistoric culture that has miraculously remained unchanged up to now; rather, it is a contemporary culture that deviates from the norm of 'contemporaneity' as set by the West.

Such a culture is anachronistic without automatically being of the Stone Age; it represents an alternative present. Moreover, Villevoye shows that this asynchronous present is no longer an isolated culture, and that the mythical economy of symbolic exchange idealized by Baudrillard has long ceased to exist in a pure form. Value on New Guinea is indeed more a matter of personal negotiations and relations, but the rules of such a gift economy can be very constrictive – the ancestors can be cruel forces and the world of symbolic exchange is oppressive and coercive, hypercoded and laden with taboos. In a film by Villevoye, a blind man sings during a canoe voyage; in his village, neither he nor anyone else is allowed to sing, because that might call down calamity on the community. The man ascribes his blindness to evil spirits or to the ancestors, whom his father may have unintentionally offended. Remote though this may seem from Western conceptions, Villevoye shows the mutual interpenetration of two cultures and two temporalities that exist alongside and intermingled with each other. The culture and economy of New Guinea are haunted not only by the ancestors but also by Westerners, whom the Papuans have often associated with those ancestors.

In New Guinea and elsewhere in Melanesia, the perception of Westerners and Western commodities was strongly influenced by cargo cults, whose adherents believe that the white men bring goods they have received or taken from the ancestors, thus heralding a time of utopian abundance for the Papuans. Cargo cults are rooted in the traditional ancestor cult, but in New Guinea they were boosted by the arrival, particularly during world war II, of Westerners laden with goods (who, on discovering the artistic products of the Papuans, developed a modern cargo cult of their own). [7] Cargo cults are thus the result of a meeting between two economies, and Villevoye's work continually testifies to that meeting. The film *The New Forest* (2004) by Villevoye and Jan Dietvorst contains an excruciating scene in which a relative of a man who once visited the Netherlands with Villevoye makes no secret of the fact that he would like to go too, pushing his emotional blackmail to such a pitch that Villevoye gives him some money to shut him up. As in the photos, Villevoye here reflects on his own uncomfortable position in the work; he does not place himself outside the world he portrays. The results are self-reflexive commodities that bear traces of different economies and do not disguise the circumstances of their own production. However, this does not mean that they are wholly transparent: the encounter between the artist and Papuans leads to images that are far from easily legible and classifiable.

Legibility and silence

In recent years Villevoye no longer displays his photos in four-colour printing but in the form of 'real' photographic prints. *The Fifth Man* (2003) is a low resolution digital photo which has yielded a print that is far from perfect and rather grainy. It shows the artist surrounded by four rather stern-looking Papuan men; the artist and three of the men wear shirts imprinted with the likeness of Osama bin Laden. Other photos by Villevoye show Papuans wearing shirts torn to shreds and knotted in various ways. What at first sight seems like a sign of poverty is in most cases deliberate and meant as decoration, as a personal ornament – an indication of how little universality the 'United Colours' of Western fashion companies actually have. The importation of mass-produced clothing does not necessarily mean that their use conforms to Western conventions, as the Asmat appropriate the shirts in ways that reflect their culture. However, *The Fifth Man* is much more confrontational than the other photos of clothing: it a trap for the gaze, which becomes entangled in the gazes of the men and the Osamas on their shirts.

After the attack on the World Trade Center, Baudrillard – who was once lampooned in the German *tageszeitung* as ‘Ayatollah Baudrillard’ because of his nostalgia for a culture in which death and sacrifice have not yet been dislodged by the circulation of gleaming commodities – proposed that the perpetrators had radically rejected the capitalist order by means of a symbolic act of self-immolation.[8] Yet the Islamist attackers were not exponents of Baudrillard’s beloved culture of symbolic exchange; like Christianity, Islam has erected a wall between the dead and the living. Such suicide missions are conceivable only in a culture that has hidden the dead away in an inaccessible hereafter, where countless delights await the true martyr. New Guinea is now predominantly Christian, although the inhabitants effortlessly combine their traditional ancestor cult with belief in an abstract afterlife imported by twentieth-century missionaries. In *The Fifth Man*, the brand of monotheism that spawned the spectacular attacks of 9/11 seems to have been added to this religious mix. After all, neither the photo nor its title makes it clear that these are not radical Islamists; they might be Papuan followers of Al-Qaeda.

It is only in explanatory statements by Villevoe that it emerges that the men have hardly any idea who the person on their shirts is, being pretty much cut off from international news; they were given the shirts in exchange for work done for some Indonesians. In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin argued that the combination of photos and captions was a progressive and even revolutionary strategy, because striking word/image montages prod the spectator/reader out of his or her passivity.[9] Villevoe shows that in an age of highly coded and instantly readable images, the absence of a caption or explanatory title can be preferable. What Villevoe rejects is the transformation of visibility into legibility; the reduction of images to unambiguous stories or statements, which captions in today’s media often attempt.[10] Because of Villevoe’s rejection of this culture of the caption, his images seem to lack something – and this lack is one source of their strength, which is not impaired by explanations given in interviews or articles. His position is not one of modernist purism, which attempts to rid the visual of ‘literary’ elements; background information is fine, as long as it is not offered in such a way that it reduces the image to an unequivocal statement.

The equivalent of his circumspection with explanatory texts in Villevoe’s films – including those made with Jan Dietvorst – is the absence of any narrative voice-over. The only words are those spoken by the figures who appear on screen. Words play hardly any part at all in some of the films, but they are significant in others, notably *The New Forest* (2004), which is structured as a succession of talking heads. Each individual tells us about life on New Guinea from his personal perspective, sometimes revealing beliefs that may seem bizarre; there is a story about a bewitched bag, and another about blindness inflicted by vengeful ancestors. The result recalls Marshall McLuhan’s proclamation that the oral culture of tribal societies return in the electronic era. The global village, as he intended the term, was to be quite literally a return to the kind of culture that existed in ‘primitive’ villages. Unlike the analytical culture of the Gutenberg era, the post-literary age inaugurated by television and automation was to be predominantly intuitive and mythical; this was apparent in the behaviour of ‘the young today’, in the sixties, who ‘live mythically and in depth’.[11] McLuhan took the modern theories that treated myth as an opposite of enlightened, rational thought, and gave them media-theory twist: ‘Until writing was invented, man lived in acoustic space: boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the mind, in the world of emotion, by primordial intuition, by terror. Speech is a social chart of this bog.’[12]

In McLuhan’s media theory, one medium survives as the ‘content’ of another; novels provide content for films. But all that counts in this approach is the effect of the new medium: according to McLuhan, remnants of literary culture in the electronic global village have lost their old function and meaning. However, their afterlife is more complex than the Canadian guru allowed for. The films of Villevoe and Dietvorst are a montage of two

cultures that exist asynchronously alongside and intersecting with each other. The Westerners in these films – many of them priests or their relatives – generally analyse the situation in a way which does indeed appear to be the product of a long-ingrained written culture. Literary culture haunts the multimedia, post-media present like a stubborn ancestor. In culture, something that has died can still have a pretty domineering presence; in this sense, ancestor cults provide a good model for cultural history. Through his montage of elements from two different culture, Villevoeye portrays a global village which cannot be subjected to a narrative of Enlightenment and progress nor, conversely, to one of a return to the primitive and mythic: it is the product of a capricious, uncomfortable dialectic.

An intriguing aspect of the films is the Papuans' refusal to reveal all their stories, myths and traditions to the world at large. In *The New Forest* a man tells of a grotto containing a mysterious effigy of the Virgin and Child which does not appear to have been shaped by human hand. Although his narrative is an 'exoteric' (and hence not highly secret) version of this myth, he breaks off because children have approached and the story is not one for young ears. A similar scene occurs both in *The New Forest* and Villevoeye's film *Propellor* (2004): a man called Kornelis Eminé speaks about an American aircraft that crashed in the vicinity during the Second World War. The historic event has been largely mythologized and absorbed into the tradition of the cargo cult, with the pilot as a being from another world whose arrival has been heralded by a spirit manifestation. The undertone is a little sinister; it is clear that the plane was plundered, and it seems doubtful whether the pilot survived the experience (in fact he did, as we learn later in *Propeller*). The bystanders start looking ill at ease and gesture to Eminé that he is letting too much slip; upon which he abruptly terminates his account with the words 'Actually, we don't tell this story.'

A culture that thrives on secrets into which one has to be initiated, meets the society of the spectacle, represented by the video camera – ostensibly a culture of complete and shameless publicness, even though it has many dirty secrets of its own. Instead of pretending to lay Papuan culture entirely bare under the inquisitive media gaze of the West, Villevoeye reveals it as an amalgam of publicity and secrecy, of visibility and illegibility. As such, it is surprisingly familiar. While Villevoeye resolutely rejects universalizing rhetoric à la *The Family of Man*, his cargo art counteracts the fetishization of difference, the tendency to turn otherness into an absolute. Only in this way can exchange become more transparent, subject to intervention and transformation.

1 Even before Seurat's quest for a scientific approach to painting, the Impressionism of Monet and Pissarro was much more strongly influenced by the optical theories of such authors as Chevreul than the myth of 'atheoretical' Impressionism would pretend. See Georges Roque, 'Chevreul and Impressionism: A Reappraisal', in: *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 78, no. 1 (1996), pp. 26–39.

2 Roy Villevoeye, 'Haridwar (UP), 13 Augustus 1996', in: *Reflecties op de schilderkunst III: de beschouwer*, Groningen, Academie Minerva Pers, 1996, p. 28.

3 See Villevoeye's artist's pages in exhib.cat. *De bril van Anceaux. Volkenkundige fotografie vanaf 1860/Anceaux's Glasses: Anthropological Photography since 1860*, Leiden, Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, 2002, pp. 70–71.

4 Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976.

5 This 'evolutionist' theory was soon criticized, among others by Andrew Lang, 'Preface to the new impression', in: *Myth, Ritual, and Religion* (first edition 1887), London/New York/Bombay, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1901, pp. xi–xvii.

6 According to Tylor, 'advanced' cultures also comprise 'survivals', but to a lesser extent than 'primitive' societies. See Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, vol. I, London, John Murray, 1871, pp. 63–144.

7 Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles, *Collecting Colonialism: Material Culture and Colonial Change*, Oxford/New York, Berg, 2001, p. 8.

8 Jean Baudrillard, *L'Esprit du terrorisme*, Galilée, Paris 2002, p. 31.

9 Walter Benjamin, 'Der Autor als Produzent' (1934), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II.2: Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge (eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1991, especially pp. 692–693.

10 On *le visible* and *le lisible*, both of which he contrasts with *le visuel*, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, Paris, Minuit, 1990, e.g. pp. 21–64.

11 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*, New York/London/Toronto, Bantam, 1967, p. 100; see also Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (1964), New York, Signet, 1966, p. viii.

12 McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message*, p. 48.