

Playing by the Rules: Alternative Thinking/ Alternative Spaces



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edited with a preface by **Steven Rand**
and an introduction by **Heather Kouris**

apexart

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Playing by the Rules: Alternative Thinking/Alternative Spaces

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apexart is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit visual arts organization founded in 1994 by artist Steven Rand. Originally an exhibition venue its activities now also include an international residency program, book publishing, an active public program and occasional conferences.

Playing by the Rules: Alternative Thinking/Alternative Spaces is the third in the series which consider issues in the visual arts. The first book, *On Cultural Influence*, published in 2006, is a collection of essays from past conferences in Poland, Brazil, and Hawaii. *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*, published in 2007, addressed the changing role of the contemporary curator. Special thanks to NLW.

Naeem Mohaiemen

Asterix & the Big Fight: Proxy Wars, Temporary Coalitions

“The deaf mute has no enemies in this city.” This was the only advice from the director of a Dhaka art center. I had returned to the city after a month break. In the interim, I had been hearing on email, on Facebook, on blogs, all sorts of chatter about a big conflagration between Bangladesh and France. About art of all things, over a big museum loan.

I expected to come back and get inside the fray. But she was sounding a word of caution. Take some time to absorb. Think before you dive in. It was halfway through 2007. The controversy, brewing for a few months, was over the Musée Guimet’s *Masterpieces of the Ganges Delta: Collections from the Bangladesh Museums* show in Paris. By the time I returned to Dhaka, it had taken on Rashomon tones. Each side had a passionate reading of the event. Seen one way, it was French diplomatic arrogance, and cultural imperialism over-reach, presuming the Bengalis didn’t know how to handle their own heritage. Seen another, it was also partially Bengali shadow politics over internal schisms that was disrupting the project.

At issue was whether a loan of Bangladeshi artifacts could be made to a French museum on fair terms. Very soon after that “deaf mute” conversation, the Guimet loan was overtaken by a maelstrom of events: the attempt to take artifacts out of the Dhaka museum was met by protestors, the French embassy waged ham-fisted diplomacy, court cases blocked the museum loan, and finally, a crate full of artifacts were stolen from the airport

tarmac. After the airport theft, the Bangladesh government canceled the entire loan, the Musée Guimet suffered “*Annulée*” signs on Paris posters and at least half a million euros of losses.

A heated culture war, where a French museum became embroiled in controversy, larger issues of cultural appropriation and theft played out on Dhaka streets. But at a distance of three years, I started to think through whether other readings were possible: a showdown as an attempt by local cultural activists to create new spaces for resistance. The real target was not only the French Embassy, or the museum, but also indirectly the military government on whose watch the loan was going through. A museum exchange as a proxy war, a rehearsal or proving ground for uniting cultural movements that were creating alternate spaces for resistance. A faulty and jittery performance of resistance in one space (cultural nationalism), allowing resistance communities to be built up on the main stage (democracy movement).

Mercury Rising & Airport Capers

In 2007, an agreement was signed to host *Masterpieces of the Ganges Delta* at the Musée Guimet in Paris. There was excitement in the world archaeological community, because many of these fragile masterpieces have never been shown outside Bangladesh. The region is associated with dynasties going back to 4th century BCE, and Paharpur is identified as one of the oldest Buddhist monasteries in the subcontinent (on UNESCO's list of protected monuments). The 188-piece collection that was to be loaned is mostly Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain artifacts, and a smaller section of Islamic material. The exhibition was part of a Bangladesh-France joint project, which started with the 1992 excavations at Mahasthan. After the exhibition of the excavation results at Bangladesh National Museum in 1999, a larger show was to be organized in France. The French Embassy also expressed a wish to train local experts in museum preservation science as part of knowledge and technology transfer.

The Guimet staff started coming to Bangladesh from 2002, to organize training seminars for the staff of the National Museum and the Department of Archaeology. The exhibition, which became an official project in 2005, was to be another step in this Bangla-French cooperation. The Guimet's website announced: "Bangladesh possesses an immensely important cultural heritage, this arising from the fact that the eastern half of Bengal has been one of the culturally richest regions of the Indian world."

Some time in 2006 a group of protestors started charging irregularities in the Guimet show arrangements. Bangladesh has an unfortunate history of art theft. Thin borders with India and Burma, little enforcement, and corrupt officials make stealing archaeological objects relatively easy. When the 1977 Ad Hoc Committee on the Return and Restitution of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin (ICOM) carried out a case study of countries that had lost part of their cultural heritage, Bangladesh was one of the countries identified. Firoz Mahmud and Habibur Rahman also document art theft in *Museums of Bangladesh* (Dhaka, 1987). The trade in stolen objects is assisted by local collaborators, and in one case the former director of a national museum was alleged to be involved in art smuggling.

A group of "concerned citizens" filed a lawsuit in court blocking the Guimet loan. Protest letters started appearing in newspapers. The lawsuit, weakly framed during petition, was rejected by the court. Now, more heavy-hitters became involved, and another lawsuit was filed. In the interregnum between lawsuits, one shipment was sent to the airport. Here, it was intercepted in the cargo holding by the National Intelligence Agency, and sent back to the museum. Things were getting serious. Intellectuals lined up on both sides of the debate—it felt like civil war within Bangladesh's urban middle class (civil society a.k.a. *shushil shomaj*).

The press went high intensity: "Guimet can't be trusted." This was a bit puzzling, as the French are not usually targets for local suspicion (at best, indifference). It's usually India whose involvement makes for tense

politics (as per Zafar Sobhan, “India is the third rail of Bangladeshi politics. You touch the issue at your peril”). But here, suddenly, anti-French sentiment bubbled up with no past history and certainly no colonial relationship. The French embassy was a key factor, continuously aggravating tensions with their undiplomatic statements: “It is time for the few opponents to this event to recognize they are a tiny minority and *act accordingly*.” The mercury shot up. How dare the French, wrote bloggers, we won’t be treated this way. A second concentric circle (anthropologists, art historians, and journalists) now formed around the nucleus of protesters.

The substantial issues being raised repeatedly were: inconsistent inventory numbers, missing accession numbers, and poor paperwork. Much of this could have been the result of incompetence on both Bangladeshi and French side, but it took months to clear up the confusion (in a series of increasingly disorganized press conferences). The core conflict was over the insurance value for the collection—initially reported to be one million euros. This amount was later called “financial fraud” by an international archaeological expert. In the face of protests, the insurance was “upped to two million euros and then doubled to four million euros through custom bonds” (French embassy statement). By then, it was too late—suspicion had bled over the entire project.

Time was running out, the court battle had already caused Guimet to miss its opening date. A Thursday decision by the higher court made it legal for the artifacts to go abroad, again. On Friday, delivery trucks arrived at the museum. But word spread fast (even on the weekly holiday, when we’re usually asleep). Protesters scaled museum walls, rocks were thrown at the trucks, a man was arrested. Seemingly undeterred, the shipment rolled out to the airport.

The blogosphere went nuclear. The arguments turned very bitter, with supporters of the show called *Forashi dalal* (French agents). In a letter to the French government, protestors wrote: “Recent actions of the museum have removed any semblance of trust in the organization, and we

are no longer willing to loan our prized possessions to an organization with such standards of behavior.” Cultural theorist Brian Holmes interjected on a blog:

there’s something all-too neocolonial about the shiny, refurbished, spectacular Musée Guimet and the booming tourist economy into which it fits, where visitors take such exquisite pleasures in thousand-year antiquities without any particular concern for the present-day cultures of the former European colonies. When the official reps don’t show a little respect while getting the goods out today, then the veneer cracks and lots of bad memories can rise to the surface...

The controversy is a crucible—power dynamics made solid. The Guimet was taking on the burden of its own history—especially the post-1945 acquisition of the Louvre’s Asiatic collection, which contains, as per Kwame Opoku, “thousands of stolen objects.” It was also becoming a signifier for a whole set of colonial/postcolonial museums’ bounty of illegally acquired artifacts. Protestors pointed to the 2002 Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums which the Louvre has signed—it can be used to argue that if an artifact is endangered in its home country (famously with the Buddhas of Bamiyan), a museum can keep it for safekeeping. The Guimet is not linked to Louvre beyond the Asiatic collection acquisition, but things became rapidly blurred in the controversy.

During the Eid holidays, with the legal battle exhausted, the second shipment was sent to the airport. At one am, French officials completed all customs formalities and the government videotaped proceedings. At two am, one of the airport officials recounted the crates and discovered one had vanished. In a panic, Joint Forces sealed off the airport. Airport guards, museum officials, cargo workers were all arrested. The Culture Ministry held an emergency meeting. Trucks were stopped at Indian borders. The empty crate was eventually found floating in a pond. Missing were two invaluable pieces: a terracotta statue and a bust of Vishnu. A slow-motion tableau played out, like the pages from a noir novel. The police recovered “smashed pieces” from a local garbage dump. Astoundingly, authenticity of these broken pieces was confirmed only through a “manual inspection.”

Supposedly the thieves got “scared” and broke the statues. Some local art smugglers were arrested. These smalltime operators managed to penetrate a high-security airport? This seemed very unlikely, at least to me.

The French embassy, in its usual diplomatic fashion, called it “conspiracy by a very small nexus of persons to embarrass France and Bangladesh.” This did little to calm the situation. As foretold in the fiasco script, the Bangladesh government canceled the show. *ANNULÉE* signs were plastered over Guimet posters in the Paris underground. Astonished at the turn of events, the Guimet staff started repacking the crates, to send it all back to Dhaka. They had already spent 400,000 euros out of their operating budget on show expenses, a huge loss to their pocketbook. Culture Affairs Advisor Ayub Quadri, who earlier announced that if “one single piece went missing” he would pay out of his own pocket, resigned. In a tragic coda, Bangladesh ambassador to France Ruhul Amin, under fire from all sides, had a brain hemorrhage after a meeting with French counterparts. Dead at 48.

British *Archaeology* magazine said the whole affair had gone “bizarrely, Pete Tong” (“Sad tale of the Guimet Museum’s cancelled Bangladeshi exhibition,” March 2008). No winners in this affair, but a lot of collateral damage. Protestors stood up to the French. Culture wars were fought and won. But where will ground reality take us? I had been trying to get some answers from the French organizers (all incredibly wary of contact with the Bangladeshi side). Now one of them wrote me a bitter email, sounding a funereal tone: “All the echoes I received from different museums around the world (e.g., Metropolitan, British Museum, V&A, etc.) lead me to think that no one will try to organise such an exhibition before many years.”

Standing In the Shadow of Main Stage

Step back for a moment and look at the political context within which this culture war played out. This was never about the French (as country, concept, or empire). the Alliance Française Dhaka is known for an open

cafe, a for-rent gallery, and sparsely attended film screenings. It has no history as a flash-point for anti-French sentiments (or even pro-French, more a mild passing glance level curiosity). Clearly the real instigator for the energy behind the confrontation was elsewhere, embedded within local country history. For a turbulent four decades since independence in 1971, Bangladesh has grown economically in spite of an extremely intermittent democracy. Various shades of military or quasi-military regimes ruled from 1975 until 1991. Since 1991, full democracy has also been a mixed outcome, with the two main parties carrying out a ferocious feud (both led by women leaders, dubbed the “Battling Begums” by trite Western press). Confrontation between government and opposition has led to blockades, strikes, and riots. Bangladesh’s history of street protest, from colonial India, to neo-colonial Pakistan, to anti-army movement of the 1980s, complicates matters. The line between anti-autocracy protests and opportunistic vandalism is always a blur.

After 2001, Bangladesh’s internal stability became a worry for Northern blocs, due to a sizable Muslim population (fourth largest in the world). From 2005-2006, Bangladesh seemed to be experiencing a democracy meltdown: rigged voter lists; crooked judges; debates and battles. As street protests reached a crescendo, the United Nations, the Asian Development Bank, and local Embassies all actively intervened. On January 10, 2007, the U.N. announced that if the Bangladesh Army supervised elections in this chaos, they could endanger their own U.N. peacekeeping role. Bangladesh is the largest contributor of troops to U.N. peacekeeping operations, a major opportunity and revenue generator for the Army. As predicted by many, on January 11, the Army responded to the U.N. statement, removing the civilian leaders and installing themselves as a “Caretaker Government.”

The Army is savior and *bête noire* in Asian histories. Always claiming to intervene to stabilize countries, but at a terrible price to local institutions, democracy, and human rights. Some regimes, like Burma’s SLORC, are still

in control after decades and there's no return to civilian rule. In Bangladesh, with the recent history in mind, pro-democracy activists immediately began to put pressure on the "temporary" Army government, to prevent this "interim" period from becoming permanent. But in the gradual buildup of anti-army organizing between 2007-2008, we noted the relative absence of cultural players—artists, actors, writers, filmmakers.

Before there was a professional middle class under the banner of *shushil shomaj*, culture workers were a primary force of resistance to anti-democratic forces. When Bangladesh was still part of Pakistan, this started with the 1952 language riots (in protest against the announcement that Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan). In the 1960s, the Pakistan state tried to insist that the "Hindu" poet Rabindranath Tagore be replaced by more "Muslim" voices like Kazi Nazrul Islam. By 1968, radio, books, and magazines were all waging hidden sorties against the Pakistani military junta. This reached surreal heights in the late 1960s when Shawkat Osman's satirical novel *Kritodasher Hashi* ('Slave's Laugh') received the National Award from the same military dictator who was the object of not-so-hidden satire.

After Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan in 1971, the cultural arena focused on building up "national identity," "new nation." This usually meant the arrival of an unquestioning cultural politics, with a focus on institutionalization and material rewards for the artists (chairmanship of institutions for the older guard, fame and money for the younger). Perhaps, disappointingly, this demonstrated that alternative cultural spaces take on their sharpest political positions under oppressive regimes. Oppositional cultural politics came back to the forefront under the Ershad military junta of the 1980s. The General was an amateur poet, and in addition to force-feeding his poems and songs on national television, he founded a "National Poetry Council" which recruited careerist (and courtier) poets. But this cultural investment boomeranged, hardening the position of "refuseniks" within the arts. By the end of the military

regime in 1991, cultural activists were at the front lines of the democracy movement. Veteran artist Quamrul Hassan (attributed to be designer of the country's flag), scrawled a satirical drawing of the General, and wrote underneath "country in the grips of the world's most shameless." Opposition came also from absence—all newsreaders (including my aunt) walked off the sets of national television, refusing to read the pre-packaged bulletins of the junta. Actors also started boycotting dramas on national television. The military scrambled to fill empty eight and ten o'clock news slots with new faces, but fears of being considered "scabs" made this a difficult task.

Within this history of continued cultural activism on a national stage (the artist as a public intellectual with direct impact), I look back at the Guimet affair through an altered prism. During the years 2007-2008, Bangladesh feared another resumption of a long period of military rule. The military also started with a hard clampdown: an indigenous rights activist was tortured to death, a CNN stringer was brutalized and fled to exile, newspaper editors were arrested, talk shows were told to stop live phone calls, and pugnacious TV hosts were blacklisted. As a chill of fear descended, safe spaces were needed where democracy movements could gather strength. We can then look at the confrontation over the French museum show as a mobilizing tactic for larger, more risky confrontations against the state. Putatively, the target was the French museum and embassy's high handedness. But very soon it expanded to include the military's handpicked "Culture Advisor," and finally, by unvoiced extension, the military government itself. I recall watching an angry guest on a talk show, asking, "how dare they take away our statues, like prisoners in a box" and thinking this was on-screen shadowboxing. His main target, indirectly, seemed to be the military government. Using the Guimet issue as a platform, artists were able take to the national stage. A debate on culture politics became an indirect referendum on the military, after all it was happening on their watch.

Early opposition to Guimet came from professors at a few universities. As the circle widened, anthropologists and art historians who were focused on North-South dynamics entered the debate. Their participation expanded the issue beyond the mechanics of a museum loan, to larger questions of cultural theft. Finally, the gravitational pull of events pulled in activists, writers and many young artists. Many of these temporary coalitions lasted beyond the Guimet affair, and even beyond the military regime. Although there seems to be a national syndrome of post-crisis exhaustion and demobilization, some of the alliances lasted at least until this year. Today, some artists who first connected during this debate are focused on new areas of activism. In particular, artists, and musicians have become active in organizing around oil-gas exploration (where multinational involvement is subject to controversy) and around state power through security agencies.

A Manifesta Parallel

After hearing my reframing of the artifact drama, a friend quipped, “You’re trying to make lemonade out of lemons.” According to him, we have not, in the end, rewritten global art power dynamics. The artifacts are back in dusty conditions in local museums, where they will be poorly lit, badly maintained, and eventually stolen by international smugglers. The cancellation of the show is, in his opinion, a small irritation for the French, but a larger net loss to Bangladesh. Other friends scoff at this position as one that is fundamentally “weak-kneed” in the face of European cultural institutions. Seen from that point of view, the confrontation has energized the Bangladeshi museums to be more assertive in future negotiations, to act as equals not submissives.

I search for new framings to recover positive results from these confrontations. A few years back, the collapse of Manifesta 6 in Cyprus was a small quake within the artworld/biennial space. The roving European biennial project ensnared in a battle over a divided city, political oversight

of government officials, and the rights of visiting international artists to traverse the borders easily during the project. The city officials sent a sudden press release declaring they had fired the curators. The curators responded with a press release that stated city and political interference had stopped the project. Perhaps there was more going on behind the scenes, but this is what I discerned from “official” statements. The collapse was very public, and seemingly all sides lost out (the city, the curators, the audience, the Manifesta institution). An epitaph by Jeffrey Kastner sounded, at least in part, resonant of the Guimet incident: “...the saga of Manifesta 6 does raise intriguing questions for contemporary curatorial practice—about the nature and scope of temporary exhibitions mounted **in complex local contexts via collaborations between native and international groups**; about the risks and rewards of exhibition concepts that have dramatic, high-profile public components; about the functioning of multiperson (and multistrategy) curatorial teams.” (*Artforum*, September 2006; emphasis added)

After the press duel and ensuing legal battles (over financial loss) faded out, part of that original curatorial team, as well as participating artists, took the cancellation as an opportunity to do something new with the demolished Manifesta concept—that of a “school in exile.” Instead of Cyprus, they now chose Berlin (I suppose for “formerly divided city” symbolism, but also where a lot of artist energy was migrating at that time from New York). Later these strands evolved into *United Nations Plaza*, grouped under the (hopefully tongue-in-cheek) title “History of Productive Failures: From French Revolution to Manifesta 6.” The failed divided city biennial became a starting point for new conversations, and certainly some of the initial interest of the Berlin audience may have come from wanting to see how the exile portion would work out. The opening event even had Cyprus officials in audience, although they lost interest soon after—perhaps the four hour Diedrich Diederichsen session on day three was the killing blow. It would be hyperbole and overreach to say that the Cyprus

collapse was the sole factor behind this new quasi-institution (which also recently ended, but fragments possibly found their way into *Night School* at New Museum and elsewhere). But it certainly was a creative use of the remnants of a failed project and an overheated political confrontation.

Can something similarly positive emerge, in the long run, from the cancelled Guimet show? The oppositional energy that galvanized that movement has dissipated. The Army has stepped down and a new democratic government has taken over. The left-leaning Awami League, which has deep inroads into cultural space, is now in power. As in the past, many cultural workers have reverted to an insular, celebratory mode. But in this time of temporary stability, we could imagine that the unruly coalitions that came together to challenge the Guimet could now channel their energy and relationships into building other projects. They can possibly leverage the unlikely alliance between anthropologists, lawyers, archaeologists, and artists to reach out to other partners and builders. The intention would be to evolve and channel oppositional culture wars into a productive end state. These would not be projects to resurrect a failed idea, but rather creative binding together of tactically useful elements within the aftermath. The intent would be to generate new structures that can provide alternatives to unequal, fetishistic, or unstable culture exchanges.

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"Alternative thinking is the creation of mental space sufficient for imagining the expansion of the realm of the humane." - Robert Atkins (San Francisco, CA)

"It's no secret that the art industry collectively suffers from a cultivated form of Attention Deficit Disorder. ... The notion of the time-out—time to analyze, to think, to inquire and reflect—is essential to any dynamic enterprise." - Julie Ault (New York, NY)

"Everything that exists and everything that emerges is almost automatically seen by us under the perspective of its impending decline and disappearance." - Boris Groys (New York, NY)



"Never stop believing in the power of new thinking, in the power of art, since this is the only way the young have to protect the critical thought, that is, by sharing it with the world, by nurturing its being." - Sofija Grandakovska (Skopje, Macedonia)

"Critical thinking, including unfettered creative expression, are vital cultural values; artists and contemporary art play essential roles in both testing and strengthening these values." - Irene Tsatsos (Los Angeles, CA)

"The only way to stop the normalized amnesia of neoliberal global capitalism is actually to interrupt the logic of the norm. This interruption is what characterizes the alternative radical practice." - Marina Grzinic (Ljubljana, Slovenia)



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