

Up for Auction: A Devoted Communist's Labour of Love

ABHISHEK HAZRA

ebayaday (www.ebayaday.com) was a month-long serial exhibit, that used eBay (www.ebay.com) as a site – literally as well as conceptually. The project was initiated at 9 am PST (Pacific Standard Time) on 1 December 2006 and was closed on 1 January 2007. Though it is not possible to bid on the artworks anymore, one can still view them and their respective bidding histories on eBay or on the project website.

Curated by Rebekah Modrak, Aaron Ahuvia and Zackery Denfeld, ebayaday invited 25 artists to produce work that would respond to the spaces and practices of eBay. For many of the artists, eBay became the very material of the work that actively deployed the format of the eBay listing – item for sale, descriptive text and imagery, and placement within chosen categories – for its conceptual traction. The attempt was to challenge the idea that online auctions are primarily for the exchange of money for goods, and to figure out ways in which the space of the auction could be opened up for further dialogue, debate and perhaps even resistance.

One of the works that I offered was titled “Bengali Manuscript of Marx and Engel's *The Communist Manifesto*”. The title gave a fair description of the actual work, as it was indeed a bound notebook in which someone had copied out by hand the entire Bengali translation of the text. The identity of this ‘someone’ was, however, kept hidden (or rather, unresolved); and I as an artist framed this handwritten artefact almost as a found object. Perhaps I had actually ferreted out this object from my network of Communist acquaintances – who, of course, shall remain unnamed.

By way of explanation, this is what I had provided under the header “Description” on my eBay page:

This is a handwritten manuscript of the Bengali translation of *The Communist Manifesto* authored by Marx and Engels. The author of this handwritten copy has expressed the desire to remain anonymous. However, he wishes to inform everyone that he remains steadfast in his complete dedication to the Communist cause.

The Bengali text from which this manuscript has been copied by hand is a translation from the version published by Progress Publishers, Moscow. The Bengali

copy has been done in a slim bound volume of the kind that is also popular among impecunious high school students in certain parts of India. The Bengali translation of *The Communist Manifesto* can be obtained very easily and at surprisingly low prices in West Bengal, India.

Bengal has had a democratically elected Communist government since 1977, although prior to that there has always been an important leftist, Marxist presence in the state. However, it is not the question of availability that had prompted the author to copy the entire manifesto by hand. It was a labour of love. He also wanted to anoint eBay with the holy presence of that great seer who actually spoke more about capitalism than about Communism.

I know that the practice of 'finding objects' has been fundamentally liberating for artists. It has been so for me too, but somehow for this particular object I was besieged by deep guilt for putting up for auction something that was not mine. I tried to console myself with conceptual lullabies, tried reminding myself that it was the gesture here that was important. And anyway the price was ridiculously low, at Rs 875. No one could accuse me of profit.

However, thanks to the low price and the inexorable capitalist logic of auctions, a couple of bids did happen. But, because the world is still a sphere and most of the trajectories traced on its surface are circular, the winning bidder eventually turned out to be a fellow artist from Bangalore. It was a very different scenario with the winning bidder for my other work in the ebayaday project – the one where I sold my own voice. For that work, there was an actual movement across geographies and contexts (http://www.ebayaday.com/12_22/12_22.htm)...

But anyway, let us return to the manifesto.

Soon after the auction went live, I received a number of e-mails requesting a meeting with the writer/copier of my manifesto. I had no other option but to plead complete ignorance in this particular matter of personal identity. At that point, I was not willing to share whatever information I had. Perhaps I was anxious to assert my authorial presence and wanted to underscore the fact that even though the act of copying out an entire book by hand was a commendable feat of endurance, what was important here was not endurance but art...

However, almost five months later as I write about this work again, although in a different context, I am willing to share whatever else I know of this anonymous copier of Communist manifestos. First of all, I don't know him personally, and his manifesto reached me through a long sequence of fortuitous encounters. All I know for sure is that he is somewhere in the business of teaching and training. When I got hold of the manifesto, I came across a URL, thinly pencilled onto the last page of his copied text. The URL turned out to be a blog. Since that blog is no longer active, I am sharing below what I have managed to salvage from some screenshots of the blog. Apart from this, I am also sharing some of the random comments that our copyist has scribbled in the margins of the manifesto. More than a subjective gloss on Marx and Engels' text, these comments deal

with the sinews of his own labour – his labour of love. These comments were originally in Bengali, which I have translated to the best of my ability.

In Lieu of a Name_01:

Six Avant-Garde Hats: Excerpts from a Pedagogue's Blog

18th November | 2005

Chance Dance

A very warm thank you to everyone who attended the Innovative Innovation course. It has been an extremely rewarding experience for us. We look forward to offering this course again in the next semester. This blog, however, will continue to be active. We will end this post with a quote from the brilliant essay that Kampankan Gupta turned in for his final assignment.

“Never underestimate the value of chance encounters in precipitating massively bottom-line boosting innovations. In fact, one of my key learnings from this course has been that chance encounters are too important to be left to chance alone. One has to go out of one’s way to programme and engineer the possibility of these chance encounters. How could someone like Maxim Asymptotsky maintain his avant-garde status till the very end of his long and successful career as a visual artist? By constantly reinventing his own innovation process cycle. And how did he manage to do that? Simply by replenishing his idea database with memes borrowed from the widest possible spectrum of people, places and things. When he was struggling with his crisis as a mid-career artist, with allegations of elitism flying thick and fast, with whom did he spend an entire summer? Not an art dealer or a museum director or a fellow artist but with a hydrologist who specialised in ground water prospecting. The hydrologist taught him to pick out clues from Fracture Trace Analysis of stereo-aerial photographs. However, within a fortnight Maxim could predict better than the photographs by simply pressing his ear to the ground. The popular turn in Maxim’s practice happened soon after.”

7th November | 2005

Vanishing Presence

Backed up by her precocious forays into the world of optics, Mashimako Bankahashi was able to figure out that unlike the protagonist in Wells’ novel, a truly invisible man would also have to be blind. Human vision implies refraction of the light at one’s retina, while on the other hand, invisibility implies that one’s material body offers an unimpeded passage of light, *sans* refraction. A number of artists picked up this concept from Bankahashi’s

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স্বাধীনতা ও গণতন্ত্র

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curatorial note and went on to collaborate on a large work that played on the notion of visibility. Electrically powered and composed of an array of rotating parts, *Large Disc* was a giant assemblage that slowly made itself invisible once it was switched on. *Large Disc* went on to become one of the most influential works of the century. Architects were particularly inspired by it and built entire housing complexes that made themselves visible only to their own inhabitants.

2nd November | 2005

It Is Not Only about Ghosts

Our last session seems to have generated a lot of confusion. We introduced planchette sessions with dead avant-garde artists as one among a range of activities designed to supplement the main reading material. While we agree that the planchette as a method of communion with the dead has remained a controversial technology, a thorough scientific refutation of it has also never been achieved. Even if we withhold our final verdict on the effectiveness of planchette methodology, you will perhaps agree with us that it works quite powerfully as a simulation strategy that convinces someone with regard to inhabiting the subjectivity of a 'historical' person. And as some of you had pointed out, the ghosts were also invoked to help you guys wean off trading in futures: while it is true that the coveted IPO (Initial Public Offering) will happen in the future, it can never happen if you continue to exist only in the future.

25th September | 2005

Innovative Innovation: Learning from Looking Elsewhere

Course Name: INVIL_101

Welcome to the informal blog for Innovative Innovation, the new course offered as part of the larger Expanding Business Practice programme at the OwenGrist School of Business (OSB). In this course we will try learning from successful innovation models in a domain that is generally considered to be quite removed from the worlds of software and retail: the world of avant-garde visual artists. Since we all recognise the impending catastrophe that is global warming, you will perhaps also realise that over-exploitation of our natural resources is a sure recipe for disaster. Now, to stretch the analogy a little further: we really need to stop mining the Google success story as the holy grail of corporate innovation, and be more innovative in our search for innovation.

In Lieu of a Name_02:Labour and Love

Every morning before the distractions of the day set in, I try to copy at least two pages of the manifesto. I clear my table, position the original manifesto against the adjacent wall and begin copying. I know it might sound strange, but it was really difficult to get hold of a copy of the Bengali translation. Perhaps if I was in Kolkata, it might have been easier. Anyway, when I called up the College Street branch of People's Publishing, they said it was out of stock. I tried some of their other outlets – same story. I then thought of asking my parents to pick up a copy and courier it to me. On second thoughts, discarded the idea: didn't want to put them under any risk. Well, eventually the internet comes to the rescue. Some of the *juktakshars* (compound letters) are split in this online version, but it's okay.

Copying speed seems to be inversely proportional to hand-eye coordination. At least for me. The moment I try to copy a little faster, the sequence of words starts getting all mixed up. Suppose I am on the fifth word of the seventh line, which has a total of eight words. If I now try to speed up, my gaze will somehow slip onto a different line – say the fourth word of the ninth line. And only after copying out four or five words from the ninth line will the error register in mind. Now, if I am actually reading the text while copying, then why this lag in registering the error? Perhaps one shouldn't read while copying. Because as you are reading, your mind and your hand travel at markedly different speeds: so even as your mind is still processing the full import of the first five words in a sentence, your hand has already moved onto the sixth or seventh word.

When will this get over? Perhaps I don't want this to get over. Perhaps I want to go on copying. After the manifesto I could take up some Engels. I can never get over these classic Communist texts. And I have never enjoyed reading them in English. Somehow for me, the Bengali text sounds and feels more real, more powerful. It's almost as if I can hear Marx's voice. Or is this some form of cheap nostalgia? Because Bengali was the language in which I first read them. I remember, after my Standard VIII exams, I noticed a book on Dialectical Materialism with Badal-sir, my maths tuition teacher, and I had immediately borrowed it from him. Just the magical ring of those sonorous words – *Dwandamulak Bastubad* – was enough to get me hooked.

Why am I doing this in the first place? Because I like doing it – it is my own small way of paying respects to this great, transformative text of the 20th century. But it is also to teach them a lesson. Just because I happen to be in the business of corporate training, they cannot simply assume that I do not read Marx anymore. Soon after I started copying, I suddenly remembered Gobardhan-*da* after many years. In the small town that I grew up in, Gobardhan-*da* was the local artist. He was also a committed party worker. For some reason, when we were in Standard IV, he was suspended from the party. No one knew why. However, it was rumoured that the party bosses were not happy with his enthusiasm for a kind of ‘degenerate’ painting that basically involved chucking paint onto the canvas. Gobardhan-*da* was deeply distressed at this decision. But he soon figured out an innovative way to atone for his alleged sins.

Now, it was widely known that local party supremo was a big fan of the pioneering 19th-century reformer and educationist, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. His enthusiasm for Vidyasagar was, however, a bit parochial, as he also happened to hail from the same village as Vidyasagar. Gobardhan-*da* decided to use Vidyasagar as his comeback strategy. He deployed the full force of his considerable skills in portraiture to come up with a portrait of Marx that immediately reminded one of Vidyasagar. To appreciate the enormity of this achievement, just bear in mind the fact that Vidyasagar was clean-shaven, and though not exactly bald, his high forehead extended well into middle section of his head. The best part about Gobardhan-*da*’s portrait was that it didn’t look like a parody; and somehow, through the resolute features nesting within the dense thicket of Marx’s beard, he had successfully managed to channel Vidyasagar’s characteristic gaze. Gobardhan-*da* then made a long list of all the party sympathisers in town and worked out a daily ritual. Every morning he would make a fresh copy of his Marx-Vidyasagar portrait and deliver it personally to one or other sympathiser’s house. He would then request the sympathiser to put the portrait up in his drawing room. In exchange, he always offered his artistic services, completely free of charge. Sometimes, if the sympathiser happened to have a school-going kid, Gobardhan-*da* would readily help the kid with biology drawings, as a token of gratitude. After almost two years of this daily ritual, Gobardhan-*da* was readmitted into the party.

I have to admit that this last comment about Gobardhan-*da* really took me by surprise: the small industrial township where I grew up had a drawing teacher quite like Gobardhan-*da*. And like Gobardhan-*da*, he too was forced to leave the party after a bitter quarrel over cultural policy. In fact, so strong was my response to the Gobardhan-*da* incident that I became quite desperate to meet this fascinating copyist, this ‘someone’ who remains steadfast in his complete dedication to the Communist cause in spite of being a corporate trainer...

However, the data streams had unfortunately all run dry. Refusing to get tied down by the imperatives of mere information gathering, I started to analyse my copyist’s handwriting – the only data set that was happily more than abundant. I still maintain a strong suspicion

of dubious subjects like graphology, but you should understand, dear reader, that in this particular instance I had no other option. Not that I bothered myself with so-called graphological procedures. I devised my own investigation methodology.

Essentially, this consisted of close observation. I photographed the pages of the manifesto in great detail. Remembering the copyist's own daily routine, I too photographed the pages in the early hours of the morning. This activity was a true pleasure, as I was completely drawn into the dialectical oscillation of text and texture. Even though I am familiar with the kind of lavish granular detail that the macro mode in recent cameras is capable of capturing, I was completely taken aback by the rich terrain of sinuous shapes that opened up before me. This was writing made material in an almost elementally palpable manner – a complex conversation between ink, paper and pressure, articulated through an almost endless array of fascinating forms.

There were all these minute tendrils of ink seeping out of letterforms that demanded just a slightly more intense pressure – for example, the point in the letter *kaw*, where the left diagonal changes direction into an upright vertical... And there was also this fine patina of paper hair that was spread all over the writing surface... One could clearly see how the moving pen had to ruthlessly flatten that downy fibrillation in its onward textual trajectory. In fact, on an even closer examination, I soon realised that this flattened paper hair was actually quite a faithful record of the varying levels of pressure unique to a particular handwriting.

It was like watching someone write.

In thus locating presence within the hidden folds of a technology that has historically been seen as the very embodiment of absence, I knew I had set myself up on a trajectory of presence-making: I had no option but to start copying my copyist's handwriting.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, it didn't take me that long to master his hand. But what use is an empty hand if the words written are merely my own?

I had to *think* like him too.

Undeterred by the paucity of my resources, I went back to his blog posts and marginalia. Obdurately mining the reluctant interstices of that text, I was eventually successful in coaxing out some wisps of authorial vapour: I started getting a better sense of his theoretical position on Marxism. I realised for instance, that his extremely significant comment about how for him Bengali translations of Marxist texts have been more powerful and real than the English versions has to be read as an indicator of his engagement with the larger critical project of 'provincialising' European Marxism.

I *had* to know more from him. What did he think of Marx's writings on India, for example?

I decided to write him a letter. Of course, I had to address it to myself – I scribbled my office address on the pale blue rectangle of the inland letter form. I asked him to reply to my home address. And sure enough, after a week, a densely scribbled inland letter was waiting for me on my doorstep. It was a detailed response on the dangers of a naïve

provincialising project that disbands the historical figure of Marx in order to excavate latent forms of Marxism in all sorts of petty local subaltern mutinies.

I had multiple points of disagreement with his formulation, and wrote back to him immediately.

The conversation still continues, albeit intermittently... And I have rediscovered the joys of the inland letter: limited space does indeed compel one to organise and structure one's thoughts more efficiently.

A postscript: I am really sorry I couldn't share the more detailed photographs of the manifesto with the readers of this Reader. Perhaps I am being silly, but those images are to me just a bit too personal.

Do accept my apologies...

