

Cradles + Totems = Negotiations + Censorship

A response by
Hassan Vawda

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Walking down a white wall corridor, a shoe rack is placed by the doorway. A request to remove your shoes before entering the next chamber. It reminds me of the spiritual warmth of entering the mosque, the house of Allah. It also reminds me of a de-sterilisation chamber from a science fiction film. Remove the dirt, the next space is either spiritually serene or scientifically sterilised. No risk of the dirt of the outer world entering, or God forbid, bacteria, a virus or an alien life smuggling its way in. Entering the chamber, we are in a room, a womb, a laboratory – a space that feels ready for experiments and intimacy. I am standing in the holding space of Soojin Chang's year-long performance *BXBY* at the Jerwood Space: the institutional cradle showing 'output' of her 2022 commission for the Jerwood/FVU Awards. A cradle rocking her performance, ritual, sacrifice and experiments. The piece was striking – on a scale of playful to prophecy. Convening and re-organising rituals in a drama of documenting.

It was a presentation of a performance that pushed those viewing to vision the boundaries of where others sit in their worldview, and the worldview of colonial modernity that has cast out the other. Sitting in one of the first public viewings, a moment emerges in the killing of a deer. A scene foregrounded in the warning sign by the entrance as the 'culling and dissection of a deer'. A handful walk out, the majority stay. The scene reminded me of the first time I saw animals sacrificed. A summer in Pakistan when I was twelve for Eid-ul-Adha, seeing and feeling goats and cows slaughtered, skinned and butchered into parts for distribution.

The next institutional cradle for **BXBY** as per the ecosystems of networks and partnerships in 'creative industries' was to be Leeds Art Gallery as agreed with project partners Film and Video Umbrella (FVU) and Jerwood Arts. Aspirations to bring 'new' audiences to the validated work that Jerwood Arts stamped. But **BXBY** did not find a cradle in Leeds Art Gallery. Presented as a decision 'made by Leeds Art Gallery in consultation with the artist and Jerwood Arts and FVU', it reasons the censorship of the artwork as having sequences 'being challenging for the high number of family audiences who visit the gallery'. In the case of a work where the artist's body, the artist's beliefs and the artist's rituals are centre stage, its identifier of scenes being challenging can also be seen as sentencing the artist as being 'challenging' for their audiences. **BXBY** was exiled to be seen in the

Centre for Audiovisual Experimentation (CAVE) at the University of Leeds within the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, but in the walls of the museum it was an impossible cradle

Isn't challenge what is often embraced in art museums? The use of 'family' is curious too – who are the 'family audiences?' The nuclear family? Family values? The traditional unit? A vague language abstracting the decision is an abstraction that is both a shield and an anxiety of something deeper perhaps. The socialised and institutionalised boundaries of what bodies and rituals are deemed acceptable and what are cast into the wilderness as abject in boundaries defined by colonial modernity. What is being deemed challenging to 'family audiences'? Is my memory too of first seeing animals sacrificed during Eid-ul-Adha also too challenging to be present in a public art museum like Leeds? If my memories don't have space in the institution, do I?

Legitimate and de-legitimate sacrifice is at the coalface of ordering hierarchies of belief and epistemes in the liberal domains, democracies, and world order. In Britain, from the image of Christ, bloodied and brutalised to national remembrance of the sacrifice of the British army – forms of socialised, everyday legitimate sacrifice proliferate. In 1980, Rasheed Araeen, on invitation, proposed a performance at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, to perform an Islamic slaughter of a goat for a group show.



Soojin Chang, *Sacrifice to the Seaworm*, 2022. Installation photograph taken at Leeds Art Gallery. Photo: Rob Battersby.



Soojin Chang, *BXBY*, Jerwood Space, May 2022. Installation view © Anna Arca.



Soojin Chang, *BXY*, Jerwood Space, May 2022. Installation view © Hydar Dewachi.

Publishing correspondence with the gallery, there was deep anxiety on facilitating this, and ultimately the proposal was rejected, by the staff and supported by fellow artists in the group show. In response, Araeen created a visual piece in negation, *Bismullah*, now in the Tate collection. An artwork with a panel depicting the bloodied aftermath of an animal's sacrifice in the centre, enclosed by candles symbolising Christian remembrance of sacrifice and panels of what would be considered institutionally, 'Islamic pattern', it serves to foreground the coded boundaries of acceptance in modernism – with the white wall gallery being the blank cultural memory to represent modernism. It is a vision of his proposed performance that can be smuggled into the ecosystem of displays and galleries. Although I always felt it was an unfinished work, without the performance of sacrifice that was once proposed being delivered.

In negotiation with censorship from one side of the sphere and visitor experience pragmatism perhaps from the other, Soojin has convened an extension piece to *BXBY* that can be cradled within and with Leeds Art Gallery. *Sacrifice to the Seaworm* attempts to structure a space of sacrifice and ritual from the convening of worlds, myths, and beliefs in *BXBY* into the limits of comfort of Leeds Art Gallery. A performance drawing in collaborators, film, audio, specimens of the 'natural world' as defined and held by the museum, and the beliefs, myths and possessions that are summoned and

convened in her practice. An active site of ritual, of sacrifice.

What then does it mean to have the stain of institutional negotiation on a performance that invokes spiritualities and beliefs beyond aesthetic, but as-ethics? From the moment the performance, the practice entered the ecosystem of the institutional art space of display – from Jerwood Arts to Leeds Art Gallery – where output, audience, process, and translations began to converse and conflict. Curators clinging to care, caught in crossfire, or caught in anxieties. In the domain of sacrifice, the convening is beyond rational. Our institutions of colonial modernity, which the museum and particularly the art institution were born from, have yet to truly awake from the cult of secularisation. Can they truly cradle beyond the rational?

The belief in magic, in miracles and in the divine have a natural demise as time progresses. A fallacy, from the data of demography to the socialised Christianity that forms the foundations of so much meaning making in our cultural institutions. Walter Mignolo points to how any attempt of true decolonial criticality is a challenge to the genealogy of modernity. A genealogy moved forward by colonialism and still echoing its meaning from hybridisation of a Christian worldview into a secular civilising mission. This criticality has not truly happened within the ecosystems of the art museum.

Its professionalisms and institutional cultures can convene difference but not believe in it.

It would have been a striking power of process for Leeds Art Gallery to cradle *BXBY* as the artist intends, or at least as it was held in Jerwood Space. Instead, *Sacrifice to the Seaworm*, beyond its own power as a live site of sacrifice, in the institution is also a totem to the violence coded and diffused into institutions of archive, of art, of ordering the world; a symbol of negotiation and censorship, an equation that many belief systems, acts of worship and community structures have been processed through for recognition and place in a world ordering that casts their starting point as the wilderness.

1] The deer was culled as part of a controlled cull of diseased deer and would not have survived the disease. Culling is a means of maintaining a deer population at an acceptable or agreed level, or reducing it to that level and holding it there. This must be done in a humane, responsible and sensitive manner.

2] Araeen, Rasheed, and Guy. Brett, Making Myself Visible (Kala Press, 1984)

3] Mignolo, W. D. The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options (Duke University Press, 2011)

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