

RESEARCH ESSAY

The Citizen of the World

Natasha Ginwala¹¹ Curatorial Advisor documenta 14, Kassel, Germany

Let us consider the notion of 'experimentality' prior to the professionalization of Science and against the backdrop of a particular visual apparatus of the nineteenth century. It is often in the realm of literary fiction that relevant social truths, political attitudes and scientific dramas unfold. Writing was a more holistic field before the systematic codification of information fields had begun to seek out a radical divide between the humanities and 'pure' science. The key to experimentation as a social enterprise could be said to lie in oppositional models of thought, which captured the imagination of artists, imperial administrators, merchants and explorers alike, as they determined the course of Western modernity at the roaming intersections of empirical and rational experience. While living 'outside' of familiar grounds to surrender unto swarming oceans, people and pluralistic culture, knowledge-gathering in Europe became mobilized within the reach of industrial prowess, missionary zeal and the continuum of Empire. Several remarkable figures of this era may be understood to perform as 'a proliferation of hybrids'¹ as their fragmented lives were antithetical to those who eventually became official guardians of disciplinary regimes and the emblematic association between the state and science as a corporation.

'The English seem as silent as the Japanese, yet vainer than the inhabitants of Siam. Upon my arrival, I attributed that reserve to modesty, which I now find has its origin in pride.' Letter IV 'To The Same' from 'Chinese Letters' (1760–61)

The *Letters From A Citizen of the World, To His Friends In The East* by Anglo-Irish poet, playwright, and essayist Oliver Goldsmith (1730–1774) first appeared under the title 'Chinese Letters' in *The Public Ledger* – a reputable British journal on agro-industry, trade, political commentary, and literature. These letters presented a fictitious travelogue 'penned' by Chinese philosopher-traveller Lien Chi Altangi. In them the author developed a character portrait rich in social commentary as well as a literary account on the terrain of cultural life and mannerisms, the question of slavery, and the political condition of England and her neighbors in the mid-eighteenth century. Altangi's letters were entirely fashioned by Goldsmith himself – who never set foot outside Europe – and thus belong to the genre of epistolary fiction.²

Himself an ambiguous figure, Goldsmith grew up in rural Ireland and later travelled across Europe on foot.³ He then ended up in London, where he gained acclaim as a prolific writer with a penchant for gambling. The author's position as an 'outsider' in British society was inextricably folded into the character traits of his travelling protagonist, Altangi. Expressing the familiar in unfamiliar terms, Goldsmith crafted a self-conscious historiography that doubled as a satirical take on his milieu as well as a lexicon of exaggerated 'likenesses' and difference between the West and the Far East.

Letters From A Citizen of the World may be interpreted as a 'stereoscopic' endeavor as it suggests a continuity between two dialectical forms: the traveller and the author. Put simply, stereoscopy is a technique in which two separate images, when viewed through an optical instrument, visually merge in such a way so as to suggest a sense of dimensionality and solidity. While photography sought to document external 'truth' as a flat image, the stereoscope, whose origins precede the daguerreotype,⁴ made it possible to capture the elusive depth of images. In so doing, it advanced an argument for a 'binocular' vision that bestows the viewer

This essay has been developed through research initiated as part of the project *Double Lives* within the framework of the 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art (2014).

¹ Latour, B. *We have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press: 1993, 1–4.

² Reaching its height in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, major works of epistolary fiction from the period include *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (1669) by Gabriel de Guilleragues, *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796) by Elizabeth Hamilton, *Montesquieu's Persian Letters* (1721), and *Voltaire's Lettres Philosophiques / Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733).

³ Goldsmith is known to have fabricated aspects of his biography such that several details of his life still remain unresolved.

⁴ See Wheatstone, C. 'Contributions to the Physiology of Vision. Part the First. On Some Remarkable, and Hitherto Unobserved, Phenomena of Binocular Vision,' *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, vol. 128 (1838), 371–394.

with a dramatic sense of travel. Described as ‘general panoramas of the world,’⁵ stereographic images delivered visual impressions that transcended the limits of the photographic apparatus. As a mode of stitching together two sovereign viewpoints, at the time of its development, stereoscopy evoked the consciousness of Empire in its unstable conquest of the world as a unitary picture. Historically, the process remains linked to a time when scientific thought became less preoccupied with the nature of the world and more focused on acquiring ‘total control’ over its representation(s).⁶

Considered in light of artistic tendencies observed in much of contemporary art today, the stereoscopic view resonates with aesthetic strategies of history-telling, the use of the archive, and a critical engagement with tropes of modernity. However, one could argue that these are not simply endeavors of ‘looking backward’⁷ but rather function much like the stereoscope itself – as performative spaces of superimposition between ‘discrepant’ yet parallel gazes⁸ – mobilizing a geographic imaginary to transgress the rational frame of ‘official’ history.

The status of the document within this literary mode is useful when thinking around exhibition-making, especially when the act of curation desires assembling materials from a range of knowledge systems. Since, the epistolary form relies on the shifting status of the document – in repurposing, conjecturing and on being manifestly inter-disciplinary by threading together elements of history, politics and religion; the eccentricities of science and the occult; as well as the biography.

In these written accounts, the vector of fiction slides across the author and the narrator in a somewhat schizoid manner – such that ‘the protagonist’ is enmeshed, as a sort of mutant figure – resting somewhere between the ‘real’ author and the character whose voice forms the object of the plot. The process of subjectivization in this condition of writing is hence, conducive to the exhibitory impulse, in which the image-object that is ‘held out’ from a general fabric begins to perform as a micro-climate negotiating the currents between reality and fiction as well as the epistemic frontier of self and world.



Figure 1: *Double Lives*, curated by Natasha Ginwala, in the framework of the 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, 2014. Detail View: *The Travels and Expeditions of Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn (1809–1864)*. Courtesy of 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, and Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Credit: Angela Anderson.

⁵ As described by Antoine François Jean Claudet, ‘Photography in its Relation to the Fine Arts,’ *The Photographic Journal*, vol. VI (June 1860).

⁶ Crary, J. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

⁷ Benjamin, W. ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History,’ in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968), 253–273.

⁸ Hankins, T.L. and Silverman, R.J. *Instruments and the Imagination* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 148–159.

Who remembers Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn? The early-nineteenth century Prussian botanist, volcanologist, geographer, and cartographer who spent most of his life in the Dutch East Indies. I would argue for him as an ideal stereoscopic subject, registering the double consciousness of his era's scientific protagonists. Initially trained in medicine in Berlin and Halle, Junghuhn suffered from recurrent bouts of depression and volunteered for the French Foreign Legion to escape incarceration due to an unfortunate incident when fighting a duel. While he eventually joined the Dutch colonial army in 1835 as a medical officer, his main interest was in natural history. He collected herbarium specimens, compulsively sketched volcanoes, and soon came to be regarded as the 'Humboldt of Java.'

Junghuhn's empirical observations cast into maps, sketches, and lithographs tend to plot human-earth relations as fictive scenographies and while his writing was exceptional in the understanding of tropical species and the charting of these island territories his observations included a literary quality that distinguished him from his colonial contemporaries. Between 1850 and 1854, he anonymously released the four-volume treatise *Images of Light and Shadow from Java's interior*, which advocated socialism and criticized religious proselytization in the Dutch colonies. It was banned for several years in Austria and some parts of Germany.

When commissioning lithographs in Berlin and Magdeburg, with scenes from of Javanese flora, exploratory travels or the viscous core of the stratovolcano Gunung Guntur, Junghuhn instructed for a careful pos-turing of local figures alongside colonial agents (you will see the interpreter, plantation labor, the surveyor, sacred deities included in the picture plane with details of geologic and botanical relief). Hence, scaling these relations so as to convey their complexity as part of his observations on nature. I'm greatly interested in Junghuhn's mode of placing the human figure at the inter-crossing of his naturalist studies – of blurring the lines when conceiving forms of seeing and narrating – for instance, his atlas *Reise Durch Java* appears more as a travelogue and testimony of his life in the Dutch East Indies. Junghuhn died in Lembang, with a final view towards the volcanic peaks he had often climbed and which had significantly weakened his body. His grave was set under Cinchona trees that especially related to his efforts in implementing quinine agriculture under Dutch governance of the region. The corporeality of research knowledge and the agent of natural science hence combine in this scenography around mortality.



Figure 2: *Double Lives*, curated by Natasha Ginwala, in the framework of the 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, 2014. Detail View: The Travels and Expeditions of Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn (1809–1864). Courtesy of 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, and Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Credit: Angela Anderson.

As has been noted from the example of the epistolary fiction *The Citizen of the World*, not all authors could voyage, and so many turned to their imagination in divulging ‘the World as Image.’ Armchair naturalists continued to have great influence across Europe, and several along with literary and aristocratic figures were key members of freemasons’ clubs and earth science associations such as the Geographic Society (Paris) and The Geological Society (London). So, how do their image contributions to early science differ from those who actually did make the journey to another corner of the globe and effectively transform their life while constituting an empirical approach of study?

To set up this antipode, it would be worth visiting the manuscripts of zoologist and ‘freelance’ natural historian Carl Wilhelm Hahn (1786–1835) who composed the first German monograph on spiders from across the world (*Monographie der Spinnen*). And following its success, authored the illustrated multi-volume series *Die Arachniden: Getreu nach der Natur abgebildet und beschrieben*. These rare early volumes were published in Nuremberg and contain comprehensive illustrations produced by Hahn himself, exposing his skills as an amateur artist and lithographer. Aside from being considered pioneering work in arachnology, these books reveal the existence of a global network of insect hunters who delivered specimens to armchair naturalists, as well as the character of early taxonomy as an imperial project. One wonders what it meant to describe the crawl, the mating habits, and the minute colour gradients on hundreds of spiders when they arrived on boats after weeks – only partially alive. The designation of the species is hence, also partly an administrative task of laying claim to the territory upon which the arachnid once lived freely.

If art continues to be the domain where entanglements between reality and the imaginary manifest as a form of resistance against fixing an image of the past, a stereoscopic reading – the multiple dimensions that a life takes on – animates subjective elements by interweaving history and the material world through the measure of personal experience. In their defiance to adhere to strict divisions grounded in Western rationality, these shape-shifting characters of modernity act as a *punctum* or a ghostly aid – continuing to evoke the immanent relatedness between the individual and a collective history.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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