

TURNING *the* TABLES

A day seminar on the 'critical curation' of art from the third world.

Held at Camerawork Monday 20 July 10.00am to 5.00pm

A CAMERAWORK response to the day

There was, it seemed, a broad consensus during the day that in the recent profusion of exhibitions of art from the third world, the work has frequently been made to *represent* its culture of origin. It has been popularly presented in group survey or 'themed' shows which identify their main appeal as the authentic 'otherness' of the art. This phenomena may be seen as symptomatic of a subtle second stage of colonialism.

This treatment of art from non-first world cultures, it was agreed, will often work to the detriment of artists concerned. The interpretation of their work and the development of their careers overall will be restrictively proscribed by the way it is *used* by curatorial cultures.

Throughout the day however interesting parallels were drawn between the positing of art from the third and the first worlds by British/ European art institutions. Discussion focussed on the proliferation of the themed group show in which art becomes illustrative of curatorial ideas. Reference was also made to the way in which work by artists who are black, gay, disabled or female; 'others' within our culture, is used to signify particular 'identities'. Both these strategies of exhibition organisation may be seen as products of so-called 'critical curation' in the public sector.

The processes of bringing art 'of the other' to audiences (whether 'the other' indicates the third world *without* or *within* our society) seems in each case to entail containing, defining and even nullifying it. Several contributors underlined the importance of ambivalence as an essential quality of contemporary art which must, of necessity, be accommodated by curatorial and critical practise.

There is perhaps a shift in mood occurring amongst artists and critics which militates against the application of such narrow, if well intentioned notions to the production of visual art. This may be accompanied by a growing interest in cultural activity which is conceptually unresolved and problematic.

The role of the funding bodies in current public sector practise in this regard was touched upon. Due to the economic climate, arts organisations are perhaps tending to be *led* by the funding policies and guidelines of, for example, the Arts Council or LAB. Statements which describe the *broad criteria* for grant - aided projects may be instead being used almost as exhibition *briefs*. Creative development of new and experimental forms of showing work may be being inhibited by this response to financial pressures.