

Uncanny Ideologies in the Art of Navid Nuur: Art as Stealthy Revolt

In this short talk I want to outline a possibility for art opened up by Navid Nuur as shown in his current exhibition at Dundee Contemporary Arts. My title combines the way I believe Nuur's work can operate in a social and political manner: as *stealthy revolt*. It also begins to suggest ways of understanding the tools Nuur deploys in this revolt: *uncanny ideologies*. Of course both these terms require explanation and that's what I aim to do through the following remarks. I should also add that I do not want to make the claim that there is something exceptional or exceptionally new about what I think Nuur is doing. I do not mean that he is not special. I think he is. I mean that what he does is neither exclusive to him nor without many antecedents.

The first term I want to explain is stealth. It appears in many forms in Nuur's creations, but I'll start with a more general sense of stealth: Nuur is very difficult to capture. Why is this? First, his works are hard to classify because they present an extraordinary range and diversity avoiding traditional ways of categorizing and identifying art and artists. There is no specific style to Nuur's work. It moves from video, to installation, to sculpture, to painting, written, participatory and conceptual works with very few common threads to identify Nuur's manner or flourish or technique or signature.

There is also very little consistency in material. He seems to amble through the world picking up objects and materials as goes, but also discarding them rapidly, such that an identifying material is impossible to find. There is no felt, or pressed steel, or polished metal, or acrylic paint, cardboard or use of sound or natural stone allowing us to say proudly 'Ah, look, there's a Nuur!'

This slipperiness extends to themes and motifs. His fondness for *objets trouvés* and his preparedness to let them guide what he makes, to the point where materials no longer provide a consistent thread for his work, is replicated in his delight in *idées trouvées*. There is no single theme in Nuur's work, no speed, or poverty, or landscape, or type that retains his attention and allows us to grasp his aim and lesson for us. Nor are there any motifs standing in for a signature, no little coloured dots, or bowler hats, or folds of flesh, or repeated historical references, or jokes repeated through the works.

I also suspect, though this is harder to prove, that Nuur has also concealed himself in plain sight. He is a funny, entertaining and generous interviewee, happy to write about himself, his studio and his foibles, strengths and weaknesses. I enjoy his company. In his case, though, here is something very carefully studied about this availability, so essential to the life of the contemporary artists. We are not being given a fiction, so much as a very convincing story; one tying the works, the practice and the maker together in a seamless and rich manner. Why would we look any further when he has kindly given us so much? This single narrative is practiced and often repeated, so perhaps its persuasiveness is a barrier and a cloak preserving the artist's deeper elusive selves.

Nuur's ability to give us the slip, to evade our categories, to remain on the run, right there in open sight, is one essential aspect of his power of revolt. Identities and labels are required to draw art from moments and events into more manageable circuits of explanation, description and exchange. Markets

and parasitical disseminators such as academics and journalists need them to put the works 'out there' and to bring them to collectors and consumers, whether as ideas or things. The art becomes intellectual, cultural and financial capital in this way.

Whatever its original power of disruption, shock and dissent, the work gives some of this away when it enters into these bourgeois circuits. For me bourgeois is a word that has never lost its pertinence, as if only relevant in a tame and nostalgic manner in the 'West Ends' of some Scottish cities. The bourgeoisie has multiplied in form and extended its deep actual and imaginary hold on our societies.

We should talk of suburb-bourgeois, of the emerging bourgeois, of the country bourgeois, of the multi-home-Uber-bourgeois of upper-percenters, of the cadre bourgeois of our corrupt states, of the no-choice-but-to-be bourgeois of those who must maintain an appearance to get on to or climb workplace ladders, and of the servant bourgeois tied to the appalling clientelism of modern politics. We still pursue surplus-value, perhaps more desperately than ever, while disguising the ferocity and desperation of the pursuit, and their terrible and inevitable cost to others, under layers of culture and art from the most tawdry to lofty, which are only ever a matter of perspective.

So Nuur's elusiveness is an important weapon, if art is to keep its distance from the taming power of circuits of exchange yet still have space to operate on our minds and senses. It is certainly not the only weapon, there are many other ways of hiding in plain sight or carving spaces of resistance, some may be more effective, something that almost certainly depends on goals and methods.

If Nuur's great variability makes him hard to trap, there are still two different features of his work allowing for some kind of descriptive consistency. The first is his reversal of the observational stance: the works are looking at us. The second is his use of found ideas and objects: the works re-enchant the everyday and the homely.

James Williams, April 2014