

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 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 Nuur is doing.

I do not mean that he is not important. I think he is. I mean that what he does is neither exclusive to him nor without many antecedents, most obviously in surrealism and its many off-shoots and inheritors. So one of the things I want to draw attention to is Nuur's generosity in the construction of rebellious communities, an invitation to follow and participate in shared creative revolt. Maybe that's what is really special about him: a kind of pleasure in helping others to join in, as shown, for instance in the many different iterations of his 'Broken concept' styrofoam piece, which children everywhere will want to recreate. I hope philosophers will forgive me, but I like the idea of children learning to make art while breaking up representations of ideal concepts into misshapen pieces of foam and splashes of paint.

The first term I want to explain is stealth. Nuur flies under the radar. Stealth appears in many forms in his works, but I'll start with a more obvious sense of covertness: he is very difficult to locate. Why is this? First, his works are hard to classify because they present an extraordinary range and diversity, avoiding traditional ways of categorising and identifying art and artists. This is stealth of rapid movement. There is no specific style to Nuur's work. It glides 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.

This is why his text on 'blackh' in the DCA exhibition stresses the importance of the imagination and its connection to a detailed and precise yet inexhaustible and manifold fount that philosophers have variously called *chora*, *nature*, *genius*, the *virtual*, or different gods and muses. His ode to blackh is a bittersweet elegy to the ways imagination can pull on but also lose this mysterious source of its power of invention and the forms it creates: 'Nowadays, every time I close my eyes before I go to sleep, I see that black noise which I can use to mentally form shapes with. Except nowadays it's more difficult to get there – why do you think that is? You'd expect to be better at it when you're older.' The power of the imagination to generate significant novelty, to break into emerging patterns and change them, is at the heart of Nuur's practice.

Concealment, as opposed to deference, is also important for an insubordinate work of imagination. Nuur does not directly address fields, as if they need to benefit from the artistic imaginary, a role for art often encountered today in a submissive relation to science. It is not for art to add imagination to science, or even worse to add a certain piquancy or power of communication to it, or to make its sharp edges palatable. That's to be a servant to science. Nuur is subversive rather than subservient, because his works are idea-generators rather than idea-adjuncts. They produce rather than decorate.

He offers suggestions and possibilities, situations and set-ups, techniques and materials. Each gift needs effort, but each is also cheap, in the rich sense of something we do not need much money for; only work, curiosity, passion and an ability to take and thieve from the world around us. This too explains the attraction and value of his practice for children. To borrow from Whitehead and Derrida: Nuur infects us with ideas to inoculate us against the modern sickness of a ready-made imaginary and its illusory abundance. Whitehead's dictum from *The Aims of Education*, 'Imagination is a contagious disease' and Nuur's invitation to generate new and rebellious shapes are progressive allies.

It is fun, in a Nuur exhibition, to detect the many salutes to blackh as multiple morphing shape, sometimes tiny, in the very small ash-like traces in his neon lights, sometimes all encompassing, when lights are suddenly extinguished, sometimes in delicately changing blots across many sheets of paper, or placed on the contours or within familiar objects, at the centre of a closed fist or around the rainbow insides of a strangely punctured form in 'Somewhere at night black got stabbed.' Nuur is acknowledging a debt and recharging his imagination in every piece where black spreads, envelops, bleeds and haunts. In an ambivalent present (aren't all the best ones) he is passing the power of blackh to us, so our imaginations are released to haunt and intensify our desires.

There's an art of composition here which Nuur and Graham Domke, the curator of '[Renderender](#)' at DCA, have shared in arranging vistas, resonances, scales and patterns of the many different homages to blackh and to this tangible yet also ideal touchstone for Nuur's imagination. In responding to questions from the audience, after this talk and another, also on a Nuur show '[Phantom fuel](#)' at The Parasol unit in London, it became clear that each visitor is encouraged to curate a path through the shows.

We move according to different sensual and ideal reactions, and prompts from discrete and far from obvious aspects: the flicker of neon, or the repetition of a phoneme, the changes in scale of black, variations in abrasiveness and density of materials, or unexpected sightlines (where Nuur harks back to Duchamp's improvised peep holes, Dalí's tricks of perspective and Wells' mirror play, taking them further in different ways). The freedom to wander preserves this art from the more restricted flow and headlock of film.

This is a great advantage smaller centres have over large international shows and museums. Modestly-scaled local spaces can ignore the command to herd, channel, time, and instruct flows through their galleries. This allows more experimental spaces to share the task of curation with the free loops described by their visitors. Were there wise and commanding art bodies today, they would forbid great set-piece international shows, and their alliance with privilege, tick-box-tourism, number-fetishism, the dying embers of national pride and the nightmares of elites, to return the art event to local, wild and everyday encounters.

One of the audience questions at DCA stressed the importance of mood, whether tentative or bold, in handling the way Nuur's work seems attentive to our approach and disconcertingly aware of our speed and line towards it. The works observe us, as voyeured voyeurs. They chart a path towards them and between different pieces by manipulating and transforming our dispositions. Nuur enjoys failure of confidence and rewards hesitation. The art controls us and thereby teaches us about our societies of

control. Akin to Andrea Arnold's *Red Road*, it becomes an exercise in anti-surveillance, by assisting us in thinking through and creating ways of resisting more brutal and forceful modes of observation, in public and 'private' places.

Close to a surrealism of objects - of the loaf of bread that begins to breathe when we nose towards it - Nuur designs things to inspect us. The study of the casual and ubiquitous manner different materials lurk around us goes beyond classical surrealism and its attachment to sexual desire. His objects are not merely shapes from a genital unconscious. Along with the absence of unifying style, there is little consistency of material, objects or dominant sense in Nuur's art.

He ambles through the world picking up bits, experiences and materials as he goes, even a plume of smoke from an open window filmed on the fly, discarding them just as rapidly. A key fabric is impossible to find. There is no cloth, or felt, or pressed steel, or polished metal, or acrylic paint, cardboard or natural stone, no dominance of eye, ear or touch allowing us to say proudly and stupidly 'Ah, look, there's a Nuur, darling!'

This slipperiness extends to themes and motifs. His fondness for *objets trouvés* and his preparedness to let them guide what he makes is replicated in his delight in *idées trouvées*. There is no single theme in Nuur's work. There is no image of speed, or poverty, or landscape, or morphology that consistently 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 retold through the works.

Pleasure in the *idée trouvée* is then a gentle introduction to the discrete power of uncanny ideology. Our tamed desire for a rational narrative around a set of ideas, for an organising system and hierarchy of values, is undone by the haphazard and distracted city-and-web-combing behind Nuur's work. The Freudian close strangeness of the uncanny, *Unheimlich*, becomes a way of sowing new and disruptive possibilities into the settled patterns of our worlds. A blackened and burnt potato shape splits open to bleed a rainbow. A microscope fashioned out of waste plastics and lenses lets us stare into mysterious and oddly familiar living spaces.

During the Q and A, I was able to quiz Graham Domke on whether the apparent contingency of happenstance finds was really at work in Nuur's work, in particular in the new work assembled around a found skateboard video, picking up on the themes of boarding, youth culture and play from his earlier installations and interviews. Graham confirmed the work arose out of the accidental find of a video of Dundee kids at play in the old industrial buildings of Dundee, such as the one reclaimed by DCA. Nuur borrows the irreverence and devil-may-care challenge in the amateur shots.

Partly thanks to this work of chance and the accompanying (and paradoxical) hard work of preparation and research Graham reminded me of, Nuur's *idées trouvées* and concept works are highly eclectic and scattergun in their targets. They take aim at individualism in science, in his deconstruction of the sinister elevation of solitary genius, violent ego and elite audience in TED talks, in the piece 'What I call'. They mock philosophy in Plato's cave, printed on the side of a dog in 'Moisty meanings'. Ideas of value and selfhood founder, in Nuur's trash and mirror work, where we find beauty at the bottom of a refuse bin

turned brazier, and mirrors that persistently and insultingly only show us our lower halves, however hard we try to bring them back to our precious faces.

I also suspect, though this is harder to prove, Nuur has also concealed himself in plain sight. He is a funny, entertaining and unstinting interviewee, happy to write about his life, his studio and his foibles, strengths and weaknesses. In his case, though, there is something carefully studied about this availability so essential to the life of the contemporary artists. We are not given a fiction so much as a very convincing story; tying the works, the practice and the maker together in a seamless and rich manner. I am fairly sure it is but one of many self-narrations available to Nuur.

Why would we look any further when he has kindly given us so much, including about his dyslexia and fears of diminishing faculties? When we look more closely, though, this storyline comes across as practiced and oft repeated. Its persuasiveness is also a barrier, defence and cloak preserving the artist's more elusive selves. This is a crucial lesson, with echoes of Deleuze and Nietzsche, and not only for artists. By showing one of your many simulated selves in plain sight, never show yourself, and avoid alerting the vengeful acolytes of identity, responsibility, jealousy and deadly prurience.

Nuur gives a paradigm for his desire to evade detection in 'When doubt turns into destiny'. This video installation is designed around different attempts to sneak up slowly on targets protected by movement-sensitive security radar. In a small dark room, the piece surrounds visitors with looped videos of anti-surveillance slow-motion approaches. Working in the dark, with blackh on his side again, Nuur draws closer and closer to unsuspecting people and property. The projected images of his stealth are close enough for us to feel like accomplices, or victims.

When beams finally detect the approach, stark security lights illuminate patches of ground and pick him out. Nuur freezes mid-step, uncomfortably close to the goal, like a cat burglar trapped at the very last hurdle by an unforeseen device. It is not obvious who's really been caught. It might be us, not only in our unease at being stalked, but as potential thieves and subversives. The installation undermines our ideas of secure places and property, replacing them with fear, but also with excitement at the thought we might join in future covert invasions. *Who should I creep up on under cover of darkness?*

Nuur's ability to give us the slip, to evade categories, to remain on the run, right there in the open, is an essential aspect of his power of revolt. Identities and labels trap art as singular moment and event into more manageable circuits of explanation, description and exchange. Markets and parasitical disseminators, such as academics and journalists, need labels to put the works 'out there' and to bring them to collectors and consumers. The art becomes intellectual, cultural and financial capital. It is as if Nuur does not want to be caught in that light, but it is also that his attempts to evade it are a rebellion we can feel and learn from.

Whatever its original power of disruption, shock and dissent, an art-work gives some of this away when it enters into bourgeois circuits. 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 old cities. The bourgeoisie has multiplied in form and extended its deep actual and imaginary hold on our societies.

To update the idea, we should talk of suburb-bourgeois, of the emerging-world-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 appearances to get on to or climb workplace ladders, and of servant-and-master bourgeois, tied to the appalling clientelism of modern political states.

The idea implies the divisive and greedy pursuit of surplus-value as the inevitable flipside of the terrifying hold that debts, clans and vanity have upon us. Perhaps we chase it more desperately than ever, disguising the ferocity of the pursuit, the terrible and inevitable cost to those our acts force to urban undergrounds and heavily policed margins, under layers of ever more expensive masonry, culture and art. The final aim is always the escape velocity required to become debt-free. Until we get there we can be consoled by aesthetic distractions and our fascination with the lives and playthings of the robber-rich, while they live off our rents and the circuses they distract us with.

The piece made especially for Dundee Contemporary Arts, 'Encore', is an anti-bourgeois piece in content, conception and execution. It is a found video piece that refuses to revalue or guild with words or gestures what's been found, placing it instead in a rickety and cheap contraption. I was afraid to climb the rocking steps to the platform where insolent skaters would mock me. The installation has everything to irritate the bourgeois sense of value and self-esteem.

In 'Encore', teenagers have aimless but not pointless fun. Skating is the point, yet it has no 'higher' aim (this comes later, with the ever-destructive label of competitive sport). They treat the snooper with amused disdain and gurning faces. Mocking eyes glare back with casual insolence, before turning away to continue a free pursuit we can neither colonise nor turn to profit in that moment. The encounter with the video is a passing experience of another domain of time-wasting skill and collective enjoyment.

Nuur's elusiveness is an important weapon if art is to keep its distance from the domesticating power of circuits of exchange and absorption yet still have room to share our minds and senses. He seeks spaces of participation rather than spectacle. While I waffled away in a seminar room, we could hear the cackles of a large school trip as they invaded and made the gallery theirs. My remarks about youthful art were guided by an audience member's joyful reading of Nuur's art as art for children, with this happy background as chorus.

When he hides, Nuur teaches many ways of lurking and carving spaces of resistance. They needn't be typecast in their rebelliousness. A community space like Dundee Contemporary Arts is an ally for recent developments in Scottish curricula, heirs to a very long tradition of progressive education, fortunately independent of the cynicism of neo-conservative instruction policy. With the essential ingredient of caring - *and cared for* - teachers this makes for welcome bursts of joy, in the deepest Spinozist sense of increasing communal strength, as opposed to imposed individual or caste powerlessness.

If Nuur's variability makes him hard to trap, there are two features of his work allowing for some kind of descriptive consistency. The first is the reversal of the observational stance: the works inspect us. The second is in found ideas and objects: the works re-enchant the everyday and the homely. I have stolen the term 'enchantment' from Graham Domkin's curatorial remarks. Here, enchantment must be

associated with myth and folk tales, with threat, discovery, mystery and unconscious pleasures, with desires and fears, with the full flash storm of our drives, follies and fantasies (what terrible sadness when each of these becomes bourgeois and disenchanted).

Nuur's works catch us in the act of looking and turn the gaze back upon us. We have seen it with the skateboarders, but it is there in 'Doubt turns into destiny' when we sense Nuur is creeping up on us, in our security-enhanced bastions, private transportation and fortified workplaces - paid for by a public we keep out with our horrifying modern obsession for nameplates, scanners, barcodes, digital gateways, biological passports and miniature self-marketing identity photographs, whose contrived poses and stock images barely conceal full social and personal collapse.

The reversal is also there in Nuur's 'Hitherto'. We snoop towards an apparently unoccupied pitch-covered pigpen, one of the shadowy animal enclosures now dotting our landscapes in prison camp rows. The lights to go out - triggered by our approach - each time we get close. *There's nothing here for you to see, and we are watching you, and plotting.* When we finally peer in, a purple neon universe radiates in a corner of the shed. The play of light and vision, of texture and feel, of the cosmic and the grimy blurs the boundaries of the senses and turns against separations that underpin rational justification. So much easier to kill when you cannot smell, see and hear together.

Vision is then not the only sense exploited for its reversibility (of which Sartre spoke in his analysis of 'the look' in *Being and Nothingness*). There is also touch and skin-sensitivity, in the way a crinkled wall of silver and gold of emergency blankets edges slowly towards us, then drifts away faintly, full of menace or promise, on a gentle but unsettling breeze in Nuur's 'Untitled'. Turn your back on him, almost within touching distance, and feel how you are being approached, weighed up, tested, consumed, dismissed or sucked into joyful treachery...

James Williams, Dundee, May 2014