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Reviews



Alpesh Kantilal Patel, (2018) *Productive failure: Writing queer transnational South Asian art histories*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press. 272 pages, 24 colour/17 b&w illustrations, \$120.00 (hbk) ISBN: 9781784992545; \$29.95 (pbk) ISBN: 9781526132529.

Gossip is a powerful storytelling tool. Art historian Irit Rogoff argues that gossip can be useful in reassessing the mechanisms that bound and define what's "true" and what's not (Patel, 47). In *Productive failure: Writing queer transnational South Asian art histories*, Alpesh Kantilal Patel, a curator, art critic and associate professor of contemporary art and theory at Florida International University narrates unwritten art histories through the lens of "productive failure." The productive failure approach recognizes the intricacy behind the production of art histories while rewriting them by not following typical approaches to depict artists with complex genealogies. *Productive failure* is a monograph that arranges histories as evidence to create palpable fictions as art history (2). These narratives, often in the form of gossip or innuendos, deal with the art histories of artists of South Asian descent in transnational spaces. Each argument in the book is supported by queer, feminist, or postcolonial theories and philosophies, such as José Esteban Muñoz's concept on "ephemeral as evidence" and Michel de Certeau's theory on "the act of speaking is to language what the act of walking is to the city" (qtd. in 118, 131). Patel provides palpable examples that focus on the unusual – what's not seen, what's been omitted or what's been observed from an experience – in his approach to art history as a performative rather than stable experience.

The book begins by establishing the author's intentions concerning writing as a way of "constructing the unwritten history of artworks by artists of South Asian descent produced in the transnational space bound by British colonialism and the impossibility and even problematic nature of such project" (2). The "Introduction" presents the author's own complex genealogy as a mean to explore art's subjectivity. Raised in the United States and currently living in



rethinking
art's histories

Productive failure

Writing queer transnational
South Asian art histories

Alpesh Kantilal Patel



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Miami, Patel, who identifies as queer, was born in the UK to a family that emigrated from Gujarat, India. The introduction also defines the core terms that will be explored throughout the book, such as queer, practice-led, and affective knowledge. Queer is presented as a noun and a verb but also as a destabilizing agent. Practice-led refers to narratives dealing with empirical knowledges of space. Affective knowledge refers to experiences generated by encounters with visual culture. After setting boundaries with the reader and acknowledging his cultural positioning, Patel explores a variety of case studies from the US, UK, and India while synthesizing each one through a productive failure lens.

The book is divided into six chapters: “Authorship: Anish Kapoor as british/asian/artist”, “Form: queer zen,” “Subject matter: writing as a racial *pharmakon*,” “Space/site: writing queer feminist transnational South Asian art histories,” “Practice-led: producing art, producing art history,” and “Affect: belonging.” The first chapter examines the failure to locate Anish Kapoor in any fixed way by tracing how the artist has been categorized differently in the past decades. Storytelling in the form of gossip can be perceived more clearly in Patel’s chapter in the rumors concerning Cy Twombly’s sexuality. Gossip and innuendos are analysed as the only existing evidence, more specifically the absence of evidence is utilized to speculate about Twombly’s queer relationship with artist Robert Rauschenberg. The third chapter explains the *pharmakon* concept by stating how it can be found in each artist’s practice by exploring how subject matter is the polar opposite of form. *Pharmakon* “is a Greek word for both poison and remedy,” which Patel argues has been used by art historians to present racialized stories of artists with complex genealogies. The introduction of these stories provides a remedy to racist and eurocentric¹ perspectives but ultimately works as poison because the stories do not challenge binary systems such as: non Asian/South Asian and non-white/white. In the fourth chapter, the author takes a walk down Manchester’s Curry Mile and Gay Street to present haptic images – a term coined by art historian Alois Riegl as an avoidance of constructing the tactile and visual as opposites. Patel compares the art histories that have taken place there, presenting this research through haptic images to underscore that the haptic expands to much more than simply touch. In the fifth chapter, Patel unpacks his own project *Mixing it Up: Queering Curry Mile & Currying Canal St.* as an attempt to redefine the public sphere in the UK. The sixth and final chapter on affect and belonging draws from ephemeral and personal anecdotes to connect three histories that share misidentification as a common denominator: 9/11 in New York, 7/7 in London, and the 2012 assassination of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida.

¹ Editor’s note: the spelling of “eurocentric” in lower case is an intentional decolonial choice by the reviewer.

The book reads not only as a strong collection of unwritten narratives, but also as a critique of art history's exclusion and tokenization of artists of South Asian descent. The organization of the book prepares the audience with theories to rethink their own understanding of the production of art histories. One of the strengths of the book is the intimacy of the narration. Patel is aware of the limited reach of his academic language and makes challenging theoretical discussions accessible through his use of tone, through which readers can feel as if they were having a casual conversation with a close friend. This strength is somewhat tempered though by parts where the text over explains concepts, such as "Subject matter," in which more than half of the text is used to explain theories and philosophies and does not leave enough space to unpack the histories of the chapter's subjects – Stephen Dean, Mario Pfeifer, and Adrian Piper. Ironically, the book ends with a paragraph that encourages the reader to embrace affective positioning as more powerful than sharp criticism or false promises. Granted this encouragement works to end the text, but a concluding chapter where the author unpacks and synthesizes productive failure might have strengthened the book overall.

On the other hand, the absence of a concluding chapter could be read as an affective position that empowers readers to reconstruct new art histories using "failing" methods of research, creation, and storytelling such as gossip and walking around a space creating a collection of haptic images. *Productive Failure* is a book for art critics and art historians who are interested in challenging how complex art histories are told. The author's writing is a competent reference on how to talk about the complexity of identities without limiting the discussion to race and ethnicity. The monograph provides the reader with the philosophies and theories to generate unwritten art histories, more specifically art histories from marginalized and racialized artists.

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is a cuir boricua visual communicator and educator, passionate about food, lover of ephemeral objects, gradients and anything with glitter. They were born and raised in Cataño, the smallest town of Puerto Rico, but relocated to San Francisco, California in 2017. Their work focuses on challenging colonial perspectives in design from the point of view of a boricua diaspora. Rodríguez Rivera holds an MFA in Communications Design from Pratt Institute in NY and obtained a BFA from Miami International University of Art & Design.