
Debunking Superstition through Installation Art: Memory as an Enabler

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Abstract

On the 4th of December 2019, street artist Tyler used an installation art to negate the superstition that 'black cats bring bad luck', following it up with a post-script which included an anecdote from childhood in an Instagram post. In this paper, the author explores how memory serves an essential purpose for the artist to have analysed, reflect, contextualize, and passed on. Tyler's process of subverting a superstitious belief assists Elizabeth M. Grierson's (2017) theoretical framework 're-imagining learning through art as experience' (Grierson,) aiding how to facilitate public discourse on debunking superstitions. This is done by critically examining the street artist's process using Dewey's (1934) framework 'art as experience'. The paper will fall under postmemory and artefacts and contribute to how memory leads to critical thinking and brings a rational temperament to society through art.

Keywords: superstition; memory; installation art; post-script; debunking superstition; postmemory

Installation art – as public art

Installation art is a temporary form of conceptual art. The temporariness allows the arrangement of objects in space. The intent is

to evoke a sensory experience. Sensory experiences have been a part of museums and art spaces accessible to those who form the intellectual demography of any geographical population. They have been accused of having furthered the 'cultural inequality' that Bourdieu¹ talks about in his seminal work *Distinction* (1979). While it has been argued that installation art has occupied public spaces but they do not necessarily become public art. Installation art that occupies public spaces often serves its aesthetic purposes, reinstating class barriers and access.

Street art as a subculture has undermined the monopoly of the few over art and given access to the masses to redefine the art forms. Conceptual art has predominantly contributed to the 'publicness²' of art, which is meant to create an experience for the viewer, 'its aesthetic value lies in the process met with the concept and not the finished product of art' (Dewey, 2021). One of the integral aspects of conceptual art has been to provide access and opportunity to people with diverse experiences and diverse expressions. Apart from providing space for the public to express creativity, and pop culture phenomena, and create job opportunities, conceptual art has enabled people to dissent. Banksy, one of

² Publicness talks about how art transforms public spaces and how engagement of the public adds to the understanding of the art form.

the most popular of the anonymous street artists has enabled both democracy and commodification of art in the form of selling t-shirts with art on it, memorabilia, copy of the graffiti art on not only apparels but posters and other things that come in general use. By doing so, dissent is made a part of the daily life. Central to conceptual art is the process involved and also the relatability factor. Conceptual art has been associated with cultural memory³ (Choudhary, 2013). Talking about cultural memory, it has been emphasized by various academicians in memory studies that events central to the sociocultural history of any geographical location constitute cultural memory. Since superstitions are based on cultural traditions and folklore, it is among the few important constituents of cultural memory.

Superstitions as cultural memory: a discriminatory discourse

Superstitions and discrimination go hand in hand. Superstitions are associations based on rumours or standalone experiences of people when passed on, resulting in wide acceptance. Superstitions are mistaken for a causal relation between two unrelated anomalies. Everywhere across the world, organisations have advocated for the critical temperament in any society. Superstitions have been seen to undermine the scientific temperaments of any society. They have led to discrimination against people with biological differences. One of them is the skin colour black. The association of the colour black are varied across the world;

When superstitions act as one of the contributing factors to discrimination, it is important to debunk it. Scientific societies are elite spaces whose general dissemination of information is in the English language. While people are superstitious across the class hierarchy, it nevertheless makes it more accessible for those who understand English

get why superstition is irrational. It is important to understand why superstition becomes an important aspect of the daily routine of some people. Many academicians have pointed out the urge in humans to control situations and predict outcomes. Based on theories from organisational behaviour, it has been found that the behaviour of a person is determined by the assumption of the outcome.

The assumed outcomes reflect the larger milieu or the collective memory of it that is passed on from one generation to another.

Superstition as a collective memory a priori knowledge

Superstitions have the potential of giving form and depth to private experience, in some cases cultural meanings may conflict with and distort the individual's experiences, and in other cases, there may be no relation established by the individual between particular experiences and cultural meanings. With that, it leads me to read superstition as a priori knowledge. A priori knowledge is the possibility of an anticipated outcome or experience. Superstition drafts a rationale for propagating stigma and discriminatory behaviour. One of the outcomes of superstitions is discriminatory behaviour which is developed by a person to justify their behaviour to control proximate causes that Shermer (2022) phrases as 'to reduce anxiety' enabling them to construct causal associations arising from general beliefs.

Kant has explained categories or pure concepts of understanding as conditions of the possibility of experience. That being said, it tells us that Priori knowledge is a characteristic of experience. If Priori knowledge has to be validated, then the categories have to serve as conditions of

possibility for experience. The condition here is the installation art.

Priori is predisposed knowledge of tangible and non-tangible notions without any experiencing the application of the available knowledge. It is an accepted piece of information exclusive to a culture, society/societies or the world. This information is often understood as knowledge. This knowledge curates a behaviour. The distortion of the experience is destined before it is experienced. The only way to deal with this distortion is by experiencing it and developing a parallel knowledge system propagated and made available to ensure attaining knowledge without going through the former distorted experience (Ginsborg, 2006). It is the context (milieu) in which an experience is developed. This milieu can be defined in terms of what Kant referred to as 'pure concepts of understanding'.

Dewey's (1934) hypothesis of conceptual art is an endeavour to move the understanding from physical appearance in the 'expressive item' to the procedure completely, a procedure whose key component is not, at this point the material 'masterpiece' but instead the advancement of an 'encounter'. The encounter involves the viewer navigating through the installation curated to push the viewer to rethink their attitudes and values. Through the expressive item, the craftsman and the dynamic onlooker experience one another, their material and mental situations, and their way of life on the loose which is quite similar to how Hirsch defines postmemory⁴.

Art Resistance and Public Space

Ai Weiwei is one of the most celebrated artists for his installation art. It had an impact on how we understand and advocate for social justice. His use of public spaces for contemporary artworks involves sculpture, architecture, photography, social media and installations. Weiwei's artwork became more prominent during the early 2000s.

"The Wall" by Ai Weiwei is an installation made from the bricks of demolished houses in China, displayed across the United States, Germany and Mexico. It was made to highlight issues of displacement, migration and political repression. The installations challenge power structures by raising awareness of the issues that concern marginalized communities. His work is deeply rooted in the remembrance of past events and people; both of which are victims of negligence by the governmental regimes in China (The art assignment, Ai Weiwei). His work is rooted in subversion and dissent advocating for change. He has defined art as "once you can give a clear definition, that is not art anymore".

It does tell us how installation art is important to understand how people remember a past event and pass it on to others. Installation can also be called to be a design of space and time. Artists have defined how memory is related to the work of the artist and how it is related to our past or our collective history. Therefore, installation art then becomes a medium of resistance and dissent and also an important medium to be studied in memory studies.

³ Jan Assmann has talked about the recurring texts, images, art exclusive to a society and its culture

Black Reputation as a case study

On the 4th of December 2019, an anonymous street artist who undersigns as Tyler, secretly displayed an experiment art installation of a clowder of cats at various locations in South Mumbai. In a post on Instagram, Tyler called their installation "The Black Reputation". The artist shared an anecdote from childhood and connected it to how they intended to negate the belief that a "black cat brings bad luck". They stated that their objective is likewise "to stun you, confuse you and convince you that there is no such thing as good or bad luck" (Ravi, 2019). Tyler in his postscript talks about an omen associated with black cats in the Indian culture that leads to the ostracization of an innocent animal. Also, subtly points out how the colour of the skin has a role to play in this to further subjugate the racial undertones often found in Indian society.

The event involved a display of installation art. It was installed between the 4th of December and the 7th of December at two public spaces in South Mumbai. It wasn't a marketed event, therefore it surprised the passersby as reported through various media channels.

The installation was a clowder of black cats. The material used in making the cats was polystyrene. The 18 cats were sculpted in different sitting positions. The information regarding the material used for sculpting those life-size cats was put up on the artist's website where he put their cats on sale. Before the sale happened, those 18 life-sized black cats were placed on the stairs in front of

the Asiatic Society of Mumbai. It was placed such that it covered the staircase leading to the main building. People had stopped by to click pictures of it. It came to the notice of various other media outlets. The artist put up pictures of the onlooker clicking selfies with the installation on their Instagram profile. The pictures were followed by a postscript on the concept behind the installation art. The artist talked about their experience with the superstition around black cats and how this led them to question the superstition that made an animal look vile and treated badly. The artist also talks about the various other strands of this particular superstition that finds its roots in colourism persistent in India.

Postscript (Tyler, 2019)

For me, they are just some cats basking in the sun For you, they have probably ruined the day already

No animal is considered quite as unlucky as the black cat. Many people in the middle-ages believed that black cats were witches in disguise. Bad luck, assistants of misfortune, omens of death, doom, demonic, witches' incarnate, evil spirits are some of the few words associated with black cats around the world.

It all started in my early childhood when I spotted a black cat in the middle of a playground. I hurled a small stone to shoo it away, partly out of fear. The cat fled, and as I reached the spot where the feline was seated, I found a two Rupee coin. Extremely thrilled and happy with my new found treasure, I bought myself a chocolate. The next day, the same cat was nowhere to be found.

⁴ Postmemory is an affect of a memory experienced by the descendents of those who have lived through a traumatic event in their lifetime. Postmemory is the actualisation of the affective power of a memory to those who never lived those traumatic times

I however, got fixated to the idea that if you spot a black cat, it will definitely bring you some good luck.

Many years later, I was running extremely late for a flight, when a black cat crossed my path as I rode on the pillion. Without a doubt I felt assured that good luck was to follow.

To my disbelief, the repercussions of reaching late had me miss the flight and experience a very difficult afternoon. An acquaintance later highlighted that I shouldn't have let the feline cross the road.

It struck me then.

How could a creature hold bad reputation for crossing the road?

Do we know why we have let the colour of their skin become attached to such misguided notions of superstitions?

And why have we have blindly follow them, only to add to the horrific mistreatment of these harmless creatures?

With this installation, I have tried to recapture a moment of my childhood and present this clowder of black cats in front of you to stun you, confuse you and convince you that there are no such things as good luck or bad luck.

Today, you can either choose to walk past your fears by walking through this path, or continue to live with them. Because if you've given a black cat the power to ruin your day, the joke is on you.

As seen from the post script, the artist talks about the two experiences, one where his experience with the black feline got him a two rupees coin and that he did not share with anyone else and continued to believe that it is lucky to have a black cat cross your path, until one day when the black cat couldn't help him from missing his flight and someone

reflected that the cat brought him bad luck. The artist said that he left his fate in the hands of a cat and associated with its colour, which is used to push colourism in society further. The artist used a satirical installation to curb this idea of superstition.

When the by-passers click selfie with the art installation, restructuring of experience is happening.

Superstition as Priori knowledge

According to Chomsky, universal grammar is inherent in all languages. However, Dan Everret gives an example of the language Piraha that does not recognise the past and hence is not incapable of collective deductions, and therefore it is governed by the *immediacy of experience*.

The immediacy of experience contradicts Kant's claim of prior knowledge of the experience since that would not be possible with the language Piraha. However, in other languages, *Priori Knowledge* exists in the condition of superstition.

The priori knowledge is Black cats bring bad luck. The categories for possibilities are good luck or bad luck as experienced upon the black cat crossing your path. Since the possibility of the experiences has been predetermined, it then shuns the possibility of experiencing the black cat in its full form/identity..

The idea that the black cat is present in front of the audience is the '*perceptual experience*' as a concept for Tyler's installation art.

The artist then asks viewers to identify the black cat as they see it.

Kant said that human experiences need understanding (Ginsborg, 61). We don't need to train ourselves to experience things when

they are presented to us. Easily explained it's the readers' response since the author is dead. The author's intent cannot determine the sensory experience each of us goes through based on previous memories, life experiences and our surroundings.

Aiding what Kant said about the need to understand the human experience to experience the full form of the object or surroundings being experienced in full form, a part of it is to understand what are the changes that are actualised by the human mind and the body when it comes to the affective changes it goes through. This change is measured by the potential of the body to change versus the change it goes through in standalone examples of situations. This process of understanding beyond the memory is how Hirsch (1996) has defined postmemory. Tyler's reflection on the harm that a superstition governs and is governed by forms the post-memory. This counter postmemory in the medium of installation art impacts the postmemory of the audience. The post-script aids the non-representational

On the possibility of the audience experience- learning as well as re-learning and developing a rational temperament in the society

theory as defined by Anderson and Harrison (2010) on how Tyler, the installation cats and the audience performs in the presence of the installation. One aspect of the performance is being disrupted by the installation, such as people taking selfies, talking about it, engaging with the post on Instagram, and giving time to talk about the installation.

So, again going back to what Kant had said; one of the ways to understand the experience of the people is by decoding the memories the public associated with that directly form the framework for their experience. When these memories when are passed on, it still has an affective pull on the person who has not experienced the event (Jones & Osborn, 188). This brings us back to suggesting how the installation art can help us redefine our collective memory and effectively result in developing a scientific temperament in the society. This also explains how superstitions which can be explained similar to postmemory which impacts the emotions of a person.



In the ordinary communicative events of a day, the child undergoes the 'act of expression', to use Dewey's phrase (Dewey, 1934) and finds a coherent structure to bring disparate parts of his five-year life experience into a unified whole in the present

Explanation of the Post-script, art of experience and memory

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Dewey's art of experience

For Dewey art is a living expression that gives coherence and order to the disparate perceptions, concepts and emotions by which it is structured and through which it is experienced.

'Experience' for Dewey, 'signifies both an action and its result' (Dewey, 1934, p. 85) and through experiencing shared social activities, a learner is exposed to new concepts.

'Art of experience' as subversion of the postmemory of superstition

As seen from the postscript, the artist talks about two experiences, one where his experience with the black feline got him a two rupees coin and that he did not share with

anyone else and continued to believe that it is lucky to have a black cat cross your path, until one day when the black cat couldn't help him from missing his flight and someone reflected that the cat brought him bad luck. The artist said that he left his fate in the hands of a cat and associated with its colour, which is used to push colourism in society further. The artist used a satirical installation to curb this idea of superstition.

When the by-passers click a selfie with the art installation, they restructure their experience.

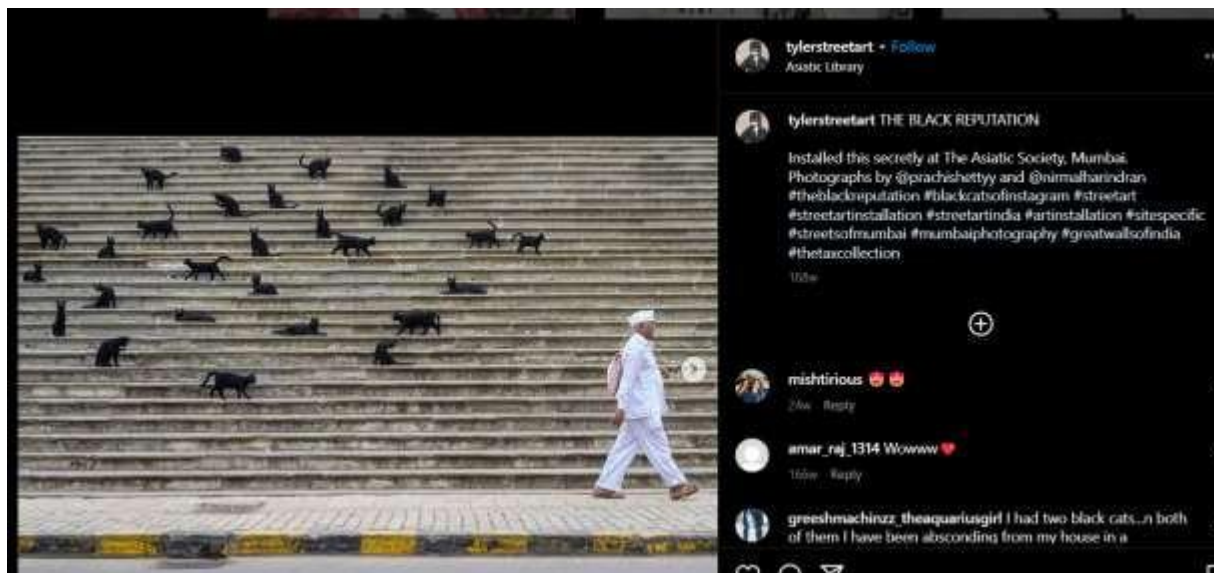
Tyler went through an 'act of expression'

'Experience' for Dewey, 'signifies both an action and its result' (Dewey, 1934) and through experiencing shared social activities, a learner is exposed to new concepts

The discussion has investigated the question not of what installation art as a work of art is, but of what installation art can do within the experiences of the artist and viewer; how the impetus of art as experience may imbue coherence in a child's learning, unlearning superstitions, destigmatisation through post-memory.

Memory as an enabler

In this paper, the scholar explores how memory serves an essential purpose for the artist to have analysed, reflect, contextualized, and passed on.



Installation art and memory

Through the expressive item, the artist and the dynamic onlooker experience one another, their material and mental situations, and their way of life.



Postmemory and Installation art

Hirsch (1992) wrote, "Photography is precisely the medium connecting memory and post-memory." She elaborates that photography reveals memory and post-memory constructed by narration and imagination. Tyler mobilizes the medium that

Hirsch associates with post-memory; however, he translates it into installation art, which is photographed by the onlooker.



Working with Postmemory

Aiding what Kant said about the need to understand the human experience to experience the full form of the object or surroundings being experienced in full form, a part of it is to understand what are the changes that are actualised by the human mind and the body when it comes to the affective changes it goes through. This change is measured by the potential of the body to change versus the change it goes through in standalone examples of situations. This process of understanding beyond the memory is how Hirsch (109) has defined postmemory. Tyler's reflection of the harm that a superstition governs and is governed by forms the postmemory. This counter postmemory in the medium of installation art impacts the postmemory of the audience. The post-script aids the non-representational theory as defined by Anderson and Harrison (2010) of how Tyler, the installation cats and the audience performs in the presence of the installation. One aspect of the performance is being disrupted by the installation, such as people taking selfies, talking about it, engaging with the post on Instagram, and giving time totalk about the installation.

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experience of the people is by decoding the memories the public associated with that directly form the framework for their experience. When these memories when are passed on, it still has an affective pull on the person who has not experienced the event (Jones & Osborn,200). This brings us back to suggesting how the installation art can help relearn our biases. This also explains how superstitions which can be explained similarly to postmemory and impact the emotions of a person.

Conclusion

Memory is a powerful tool for understanding trauma and memorialisation. This combination of superstition and environmental engagement creates a postmemory of beliefs embedded in cultures. Broadening this out, postmemory becomes a means of examining regressive beliefs, superstitions and discriminatory presuppositions that we simply cannot witness whenever asked, because they just highly are accepted notions leading to discriminatory behaviours. Walking through the clowder of cats, in this situation, will help in propagating a new collective memory through art

“Discriminatory notions are pushed as collective memory – which become superstitions and then superstitions become a

part of our politics that we carry and practice and unintentionally propagate.”

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