

Centres / Peripheries – Complex Constellations



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Imprint

Editorial: Centres/Peripheries– Complex Constellations

Ronald Kolb, Camille Regli, Dorothee Richter

Artistic and curatorial practices can be seen as the prime testimonies of transformative movements—on the one hand situated in a specific site and region, and on the other, transgressing disciplines, classes, norms—proposing new forms and relations of living and establishing these practices (building centres along the way) but at the same time always changing their positions, never staying at the centre, but instead unfolding on the periphery of social life.

In this *OnCurating* Issue, we searched for and researched projects and institutions that hold at their core something between the lines of centres–peripheries with their transversal practices and modus operandi.

For many of our interview partners, the question of oppositionality is less important than the equal networking of their own artistic and curatorial practices in an international exchange, which is informed by the historical and local references of the particular place. These projects do not establish a distinction—aesthetically and personally; they open up to a broader public (and not only the “art insider”), and they relate to an embracing mode of encounters with “other” cultures, identities, and ideas, and present an inclusive gesture.

Instead of voicing one view on the complex constellations of centres–peripheries in the arts, we have decided to propose different introductory statements to show the multifaceted approaches to this topic.

Ronald Kolb

If one still is able to speak about Centres and Peripheries today, it must clearly unfold through more complex constellations of power relations, situated knowledges, economic dependencies, expanded spatial dimensions that have long overcome regional and national borders, and states of thought and practice, of solidification and ephemerality.

Referring to the Centre–Periphery (or the Core–Periphery) model, one must be aware of its origins in economics: Centre–Periphery basically describes an (unequal) relationship between places. It is used as a spatial description of a relation between a so-called “advanced” (or dominating) place and its allegedly “lesser developed” (or serving) periphery. In this model, the centre is the place of power (of law, of trade, of military force) and is a door to the rest of the world. The periphery is a remote, rural place, and it delivers raw materials, food, and other resources to the centre under the condition of exploitation. The centre provides goods and “superior” products. This relation is described as exploitative in the Marxist tradition: from a global point of

view, so-called underdeveloped countries (the periphery) have to be kept in dependency to Wealthy States (the Core or the Centre). “According to the centre–periphery model, underdevelopment is not the result of tradition, but is produced as part of the process necessary for the function of accelerated capitalism in the central capitalist countries—and its continued reproduction on a world scale.”¹

However, conveyed within an art discourse, this relationship has already been thoroughly scrutinized, questioned, and turned upside down.

The publication *Im Zentrum der Peripherie* (In the Centre of the Periphery), published by Marius Babias in 1995, described the art discourse of the 1990s. The preface addresses the historical political context—the consequences of the end of the Cold War, and the dissolution of the binary world order in West and East and the associated delay in the complexification of geopolitical and cultural relations worldwide—but at that time understandably it did this only from the point of view of the European (decidedly German) and US American perspectives. Centre–Periphery is understood here as the relationship between the “autonomous artistic proposition” (“künstlerische autonome Behauptung“) as the centre and an oppositional theory-based practice of discourse and mediation as the periphery.²

A postcolonial exhibition practice and theory conscious of geopolitical contexts came to light much later. Catherine David’s *documenta X* (1997) introduced an explicit political stance in art and exhibition practice on a big stage, placing the “100 Days - 100 Guests” talk format literally in the middle of the documenta hall. And with *Documenta11* (2002) by the late Okwui Enwezor, art established itself beyond Western connoted genealogy and found its way into the larger art canon. *documenta 14* (2017) lastly related to Nikos Papastergiadis’ concept of the “South,” which was outlined in the essay “What Is the South?”³ The “South” is not to be understood as a place, but as a “little public sphere” where dialogue and collaboration are still possible, absent from fragmentation and commercialisation. This concept shifts away from place and emphasises a mode of thinking and sharing. Papastergiadis conceives this “spherical concept” within a global network like this:

“In the recent past it [the South] has been revived as a possible frame for representing the cultural context of not just regions that are geographically located in the South, but also those that share a common post-colonial heritage. [...] In geopolitical terms the South is not confined to the southern hemisphere as it captures elements that are located on both sides of the equatorial divide. The only constant for those who identify with the concept of the South is a dual awareness that the Euro-American hegemony in global affairs has concentrated power in the North, and that survival requires a coordinated transnational response.”⁴

Following this line of thought, it may be no surprise that the next documenta is being directed by the community-based Indonesian collective Ruan Grupa with a decisively discursive practice. Their first statement addressed a globally oriented art and culture platform declared an aim to “focus documenta 15 on today’s injuries, especially ones rooted in colonialism, capitalism, or patriarchal structures, and contrast them with partnership-based models that enable people to have a different view of the world.”⁵

All these efforts of complex entanglements must still be considered against the backdrop of a hegemonically structured art market with its need for commodification.

Dorothee Richter

To come back to the dichotomy of Centre–Periphery seems to be a bit outdated after the discussion on *South as a State of Mind*, proposed by Quinn Latimer and Adam Szymczyk. I will try to explain, in the following argument, why we used it nonetheless as a framework for this issue of *OnCurating*. In the introduction to the fourth issue, Latimer and Szymczyk remark: “Over the past year, we have repeatedly found ourselves reaching for books and texts about violence. Perhaps with the urge to understand that which swells like waves around us, threatening to take us under in all its manifold, rising forms: economic violence, linguistic violence, nationalistic violence, environmental violence, gender and racial violence. In this fourth and final issue of the documenta 14 journal *South as a State of Mind*, it seemed necessary to name it, finally, as one of the structuring devices of our world.”⁶ In our approach about the complicated relations between peripheries and centres, we started to think about the structural violence that is embedded in this connection. “Structural violence” is a term coined by Norwegian sociologist, mathematician, and founder of peace and conflict studies Johan Galtung to describe the difference in access to all kinds of possibilities and goods like unpolluted air, clean water, medical service, education, nourishment, transport, etc. for different parts of a population.⁷ With this analytical method, the violence that is embedded in structural relations is easily uncovered. So, it becomes obvious that violent relations are manifold and that they cover globally different societies and the relations between them. I must interject here that, from a Marxist standpoint, the economic relations are fundamental to any cultural manifestation, which are in many ways related to the economic basis. What Marx has called superstructure was later discussed as Ideological Superstructures by Louis Althusser or as hegemony by Antonio Gramsci. For Adorno, mass media and cultural industry were considered a mass deception, as Gerald Raunig puts it: “The first component of the concept of culture industry, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is that it totalizes its audience, exposing this audience to a permanently repeated, yet ever unfulfilled promise: ‘The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises.’”⁸ But culture also has the power to show the truth, which means in this sense always also the truth about production, relations of production processes, and economics. Or, in other words, the concept of hegemony makes it thinkable that counter-hegemony is also possible.

At the present moment, centres and peripheries have multiplied and with them oppressive and productive relations. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein’s discussion on *Race, Nation, Class, Ambiguous Identities*⁹ is still extremely relevant for understanding these constellations, especially the renewed racism that threatens to undermine and overcome (more or less) democratic systems. The concept developed by Wallerstein, the world-eco system, argues with the centre, the half periphery, and the periphery. Of course, I cannot summarize Wallerstein’s extensive work over decades and his series of substantial publications here, but it is necessary to start to think in this direction. Liberalism and a globally acting capitalism have developed historically in concentric circles including more and more regions (developing and destroying nations along the way). Instead of leading to more equal rights and resources worldwide, it developed in complex systems of suppression. Only through the over-exploitation of the global South can some of the wage earners of the “Global North” achieve relative prosperity. But even in the “North,” only a few profit from the improvements, while at the same time in the “South” some parts of the population may also benefit. And historically there were different centres, which acted for longer periods independently, see, for example, China.

As the economic circle in a capitalist system is developing in phases of expansion, boom, recession, and depression, the system sometimes needs a large workforce, but it also has to get rid of paid workforces all of a sudden—not to mention whole areas of societal production that are not supposed to be paid at all in capitalism like care work, (reproductive work), work for the commons, work for NGOs/associations, and so forth. So, on the one hand different groups of the subalterns of the periphery, the poorly paid workers in the capitalist centres and the well-paid workers are differently pronounced and pursue different focuses, plus the system of ideological racist and sexist and national divisions helps to keep them in check, always being afraid of other groups that could supposedly threaten their income and make their living conditions (even) worse. Explaining why universalism and racism go so well together, Wallerstein describes the situation as follows: “A capitalist system that is expanding (which is half the time) needs all the labour-power it can find, since this labour is producing the goods through which more capital is produced, realized and accumulated. Ejection out of the system is pointless. But if one wants to maximize the accumulation of capital, it is necessary simultaneously to minimize the costs of production (hence the costs of labour-power) and minimize the costs of political disruption (hence minimize—not eliminate, because one cannot eliminate—the protest of the labour force.) Racism is the magic formula that reconciles these objectives.”¹⁰

The systems of racism, sexism, class division, and nationalism establish and enforce these conditions. One obvious state of the neoliberal situation of today is that all working conditions (in the centres, the half periphery, and the periphery) became more and more unstable and insecure, a situation I am sure every reader of these lines is sharply aware of. (With that, I do not mean to indicate that the situations are the same, of course, they are very different, but this neoliberal insecurity affects most.) Having said that, one could of course not claim that art as such would be the means to overcome racism, sexism, class division, and nationalism. Nevertheless, art and culture have the possibility to produce “truth,” to reveal and to comment, and they are able to act to a certain extent as a counter-hegemony or, as Adorno and Horkheimer have unmasked so-called cultural industry, art and culture are able to confuse and affectively involve people in false ideas about their conditions. As there are artists and curators worldwide who are thinking about these complex situations in times of the rise of right-wing propaganda, we wanted to show and discuss some of these artistic and curatorial projects here and make readers aware of shared interests. Art and culture provide the possibility of influencing ideological perspectives, so we should use this space of representation in a thoughtful way.

Camille Regli

How to understand the complex dichotomy between centre and periphery when looking at the way the art world is mapped and distributed around the globe? Isn't it like asking oneself to reflect on the spatial relationship between inclusion and exclusion, or more conceptually between the mainstream and the margins? From the assumption that the centre represents the sphere of consensus and socio-political and cultural authority, the periphery would therefore refer to what stands *outside* that sphere. In a vivid way, it is like a washing machine: not only do elements of an economic and ideological nature rotate around the centre, but they are also attracted by it. Artists and intellectuals move to big cities, the so-called creative and cultural clusters where there is greater economic stability, wealth, more movements of people,

monuments, established institutions, and cultural manifestations that influence and give the watchword for market trends.

The research undertaken in *Art in the Periphery of the Centre* (2015) by Christoph Behnke, Cornelia Kastelan, Valérie Knoll, and Ulf Wuggenig¹¹ draws the hypothesis that cultural centres have organically attracted, over the years, groups of artists and intellectuals who have built the cities' cultural profiles, despite the economic situation. The rise and fall, but also the geographical shift, of cultural centres are observed by large samples of data, which state that some regions are culturally more fertile than others, and that there is an apparent correlation between the places where artists and intellectuals were born and where they died. For centuries, the centre has thus represented the nest of social, collective, and economic life, subordinating the peripheries by means of higher productivity and exchanges among individuals. Being able to demonstrate such outcomes is very telling in the way Western cities work in attracting capital of all kinds.

This insatiable appetite for the centre to remain the centre has led it to auto-regulate itself and to establish an overarching culture towards the rural. In this sense, the peripheries have become profoundly ambiguous regions: while trying to build relationships with the centre, they still find themselves heavily excluded, both on the structural and intellectual level. Karl Marx approaches this antagonism (or *antithesis*) between the city and the countryside by seeking the abolition of the capitalist production of labour that is imposed by cities. According to Marxist theorists, the cities aspire to economic growth and therefore are able to position ideals and exploit mechanisms that are beneficial to establish power and status. The movement and changes in spatial realities in terms of labor, commodities, capital, and class are dependent on the state's decisions and market exigencies. To add to this argument, some decades later American economist and sociologist Richard Florida claimed in his much debated contemporary book, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002),¹² that the rise of a creative class in today's post-industrial cities has had driving forces. In other words, he sustains that in a fast-paced society and growing globalisation, modern creative societies steadily contribute to economic functions. Even if this might be considerable for 'leading' European cities such as London, Paris, Berlin, or American regions such as New York and San Francisco—which are built on common moral, social, and cultural values—what about regions that still feel repressed or even exploited by the West (in both ideological and economic terms) and underrepresented areas that don't flourish from social and economic stability? Could these peripheries use the power of art to sustain their local communities and economies as well as shed light on diversity and inclusion?

The urgency to shift our point of view but also to sustain activities, practices, and ideas in the margins could contribute to diversifying the offer currently available in the arts. It would create more visibility for alternative cultures, communities, and traditions; generate more economic strength; and essentially shake the hegemonic structures that hover over our heads. This idea was already expressed in the '70s and '80s by avant-garde theorists, such as Peter Bürger in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974),¹³ in which he extensively refutes the idea of "art as an institution," claiming that art's production and distribution in institutional structures are conditioned by ideas that are determined by the higher societal class—which essentially biases our perception and reception of art. For Bürger, joining Marx's ideas, the institution gets away from the "praxis of life" and is fundamentally detrimental to the meaning of art. Therefore, they say it needs to be closer to the people and to collective craft. To some extent, the

discourse could still be valid nowadays, as it frames significant questions on how consensus is shaped and what is accepted and rejected in terms of art creation and exhibition but also in terms of meaning and intention: art should exist to raise awareness and open up conversations for everyone, no matter its geographical location.

By softly tackling different critical arguments from various fields (from contemporary research to economic sociology, Marxism and the avant-garde), this foreword aims to embrace the complexity of the issue and to look at it from various perspectives.

Through interviews and interventions with academics, curators, artists, collectives, and initiators, this *OnCurating* issue further reflects and discusses the importance of giving space and voice to unusual and surprising places in the art world.

This Issue of *OnCurating* came together over a period of two years, from 2018 to 2019. Students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating (www.curating.rog) researched (de)centralised artistic and curatorial practice. These essays are published in the first part of this issue. Most of these contributions were advised by art and cultural scientist Aoife Rosenmeyer in 2018.

In a second input in 2019, students (and lecturers) of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating conducted interviews with curators, artists, and projects close to this topic, expanding on the notion of the (de)centralised, shifting to the precarious dichotomy of Centre–Periphery and its complex constellations within art, culture, politics, and economics.

The contribution “Urban Villages within the Megalopolis of Shenzhen: A (De)centralised Driver for Urban Change?” by Christine Maria Kaiser takes the **Shenzhen BI-CITY BIENNALE OF URBANISM/ARCHITECTURE (UABB)** from 2018 as an example for thinking of urban development and what long-standing impact biennials can have on a city and its city life, especially in the fast-growing urban mega-area of Shenzhen.

Kristina Grigorjeva’s essay, “Far Away, So Close: Between Congiunta and Piz Linard,” engages in the move of contemporary art establishments to the periphery of the centre. She interviews **Hans Schmid**, initiator and director of Piz Linard, a cultural centre in Tessin, Lower Engadin, and architect **Peter Märkli** with his Museum Giornico in Tessin.

In her contribution, “The Zuoz Case,” Heike Biechteler reports on the clash between a picturesque and very remote mountainside landscape and the meeting of a prestigious line-up of contemporary art directors in the 7th **Engadin Art Talks**, held in January 2018, in which central figures of the art discourse assemble in the countryside.

Marco Meuli discusses the problematics of exhibiting “otherness.” His essay, “Curating Otherness: A Selective Reading of the Diaspora Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale,” concentrates on installations and artworks on display at the **Diaspora Pavilion** at the 2017 Venice Biennale.

Franziska Herren's interview piece, "National Tourist Routes Project in Norway: Architecture and Artworks for Resting, Recollecting, and Reflecting," asked the curator of the Directorate of Public Roads artist and curator **Knut Wold** about the project that established artistic interventions of art and architecture alongside Norwegian hiking paths.

In her article, "The Repatriation of the White Cube: How Should the Rural Capitalise on Art?," Camille Regli discusses with artist **Renzo Martens** about the complex relationship between the history of the former plantation territory in Lusanga (Democratic Republic of Congo) and the impact that art can have on social, economic, and cultural dimensions for the locals.

Ella Krivanek interviewed **Gabi Ngcobo**, the artistic director of the Berlin Biennale 2018, about ongoing decolonial processes in art and culture.

Giovanna Bragaglia talked with Hong Kong-based artist Kacey Wong, whose works are often interventions in and with social movements. In her contribution, "**Kacey Wong: Art and Resistance**," they talk about his practice and definitions of Protest Art, Activist Art, and Resistance Art.

Miwa Negoro's interview, "Poetics of Topological Secrecy," with scenographer **Lukas Sander** reviews his site-specific work *Deus in Machina*, which transformed a gas tank in an industrial site into an immersive sound installation. The work, while theatrical in nature, introduced the audience to a metaphorical remoteness outside of an institutional framework.

In his interview with artist **Olaf Kühnemann**, Oliver Rico touches on the "nomadic" lifestyle of an artist, and Kühnemann's own life history between Tel Aviv, New York, Berlin, and Basel.

Yan Su's email conversation with **Gregory Sholette**, "From an Imaginary Interview with Gregory Sholette," took unexpected turns through misunderstandings and schedule restrictions. The outcome is a semi-fictionalised interview (with questions added in retrospect) about the key questions in Sholette's book, *Dark Matter*.

In the interview "Anxiety Now Prevails" conducted by Anastasia Chaguidouline, Dmitry Vilensky from **Chto Delat** speaks about their politically infused artistic practice and how it has developed as a gesture of dissidence within the context of Russia since 2000. Although a lot of new art institutions have opened up in Moscow, the collective made St. Petersburg their home base and connected internationally through their activist network.

Raqs Media Collective was asked by Francesca Ceccherini and Noriko Yamakoshi about their artistic-turned-curatorial practice. They point out that the Centre-Periphery Model—as a model of separation after the Second World War—is no longer in charge, with the so-called "old centre" overtaken by new museums and the founding of biennials in Asia. Letting these old dichotomies go, they concentrate instead on an "emergent polyphony—a polyphony that is poly-axial and generous in how it sees the world."

Pongpan Suriyapat interviewed artist, activist, and poetess **Jittima “Len” Pholsawek** from Thailand. They discussed her work *Boat of Hope* for the Bangkok Art Biennale 2019, and her community-based and education-driven artistic practice.

Carolina Sanchez talked with **POST-MUSEUM (Jennifer Teo and Tien Wei Woon)** about their (nomadic) practice—with a stance of independent—working “with the city” (Singapore) and in different constellations with artists, neighbours, and scholars. They are interested in “practicing the city” in more meaningful ways.

Anuradha Vikram, the artistic director of the **18th Street Arts Center**—a residency and exhibition center—, lays out the institution’s position geographically—situated in Santa Monica, Los Angeles, after moving from the greater San Francisco Bay Area due to gentrification—and socio-economically—by supporting marginalised artists and raising visibility in this interview by Eveline Mathis and Domenico Roberti.

In the conversation between **Lisa Biedlingmaier** and Beatrice Fontana, Biedlingmaier explains the history of the self-organized, artist-run **Kunstverein Wagenhalle/ Container City** in Stuttgart and the relationship of the remoteness of an “alternative art scene” to a commercialised (art) world. In light of political decision-making and the struggles of gentrification and professionalization, Wagenhalle managed to establish a space for art and music.

The Lab’s director **Dena Beard** spoke with Paola Granati and Ronny Koren about her “transition” from being in a traditional art institution to running a non-profit experimental art and performance space in San Francisco, and how the conventions of perceiving art are ultimately dependent on its institutional framework. On the other hand, with the Lab, Beard focusses on artists who deal with “unnameable, irrecoverable parts of our existence,” which in return does not easily find access to the market.

Domenico Roberti’s interview with **Enrico Piras** and **Alessandro Sau**, the founders of **Montecristo Project**, deals with the specific setting of an exhibition space in an undisclosed and deserted island along the Sardinian coast. The exhibition can only be accessed through documentation—remoteness in this case is not only spatial, but also mediated in its receptibility.

In the interview with **Stacy Hardy (Chimurenga Magazine)** by Gozde Filinta titled “Who No Know, Go Know’: How to Shift Knowledge about/of Africa,” Hardy explains Chimurenga’s curatorial and artistic practice and how it was formed in a Pan-African Market location with a high level of tourist traffic on the one hand, while thriving for “border zones between informal and formal, licit and illicit, or chaotic and ordered.”

In his conversation, “Encounter with Finnish Artist and Curator **Ritva Kovalainen**,” Jan Sandberg got to know the story of the multi-art **Festival Norpas** based in Kimito, Finland. Kovalainen speaks about the struggles to cater to communities despite being considered an odd bird.

Maya Bamberger asked **Damian Christinger** about his project **Assembleia Mother-Tree** and the risks and opportunities of inviting people from the Amazon to Zurich. The installation in the main station of Zurich invited passers-by to come in, meditate, and contemplate, while Christinger organized an Assembleia, together with scholars, artists, students, and activists from many parts of the world to sit together in the tent and talk, dance, and sing on the future of our planet.

Marta Rodriguez Maleck talks with Dorothee Richter about her projects engaging in personal and collective trauma in New Orleans: “This approach allows me to honour multiple truths at once, dismantle assumptions based on perceived identity, and encourage communication between groups of people who come from different backgrounds with their own set of expectations.”

In “La Quadreria di Anita Spinelli: A Place Where Silence and Dynamism Prevail”, Camille Regli speaks with **Maria-Cristina Donati** about the Swiss artist Anita Spinelli’s legacy and about the challenges and opportunities of managing an art collection that is spatially remote.

Damian Christinger had a conversation with **Theaster Gates** about how his upbringing influenced his show at Kunstmuseum Basel in 2018.

Notes

1 See: “Centre–Periphery Model in Dependency Theory,” Encyclopedia.com, accessed May 28, 2019, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/centre-periphery-model>.

2 See: Marius Babias, “Vorwort,” in *Im Zentrum der Peripherie. Kunstvermittlung und Vermittlungskunst in den 90er Jahren*, FUNDUS Vol. 128 (Hamburg: Philo Verlagsgesellschaft, 1995), 24–26.

3 Nikos Papastergiadis, “What is the South?,” *South as a State of Mind*, accessed May 28, 2019, <https://southasastateofmind.com/south-remembers-south-nikos-papastergiadis>.

4 Ibid.

5 Press release, *documenta 15*, accessed May 28, 2019, <https://www.documenta.de/en/news>.

6 Quinn Latimer and Adam Adam Szymczyk, *South as a State of Mind 4* (Fall/Winter 2017), accessed May 28, 2019, <https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/>.

7 Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6:3 (1969).

8 Gerald Raunig, “Creative Industries as Mass Deception,” *Transversal Texts* (Jan. 2007), accessed May 28, 2019, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0207/raunig/en>.

9 Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class, Ambiguous Identities* (London, New York: Verso, 1991).

10 Immanuel Wallerstein, “Ideological Tensions of Capitalism,” in Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class, Ambiguous Identities*, 33.

11 Christoph Behnke, Cornelia Kastelan, Valérie Knoll, and Ulf Wuggenig, *Art in the Periphery of the Centre* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015).

12 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: Revisited* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

13 Peter Bürger, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde, Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 4. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Urban Villages within the Megalopolis of Shenzhen: A (De)centralised Driver for Urban Change?

Christine Maria Kaiser

Introduction

Art is shown in constructed spaces like museums, off spaces, private homes, or even in public spaces like squares or parks. But it always deals with the idea of showing and a scheduled timeframe in which the artworks can be seen. Nowadays, the venues for exhibitions get more and more (de)centralised and encompass a wider territory. The aspiration behind these developments is based on the common idea of improving conditions, showing potentials, and really starting to move things forward rather than just offering empty criticism. In the context of an architecture and urbanism biennial, it is more important than ever not

just to show another model for utopias, but to really show what these approaches are able to transfer and do in real life. So, several questions arise: To what extent can a biennial change urban development trajectories? What are the novel elements introduced by the Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture (UABB) in Shenzhen in 2018? What role does the urban village Nantou Old Town take on as the setting of the UABB 2018? And how can we better gain an applied understanding of (de)centralised urban space?



Architectural intervention on site of the urban village and the UABB. Photo: Gianni Talamini.



Within the Cross Street Arena: Old warehouses before the restructure took place. Courtesy of UABB2017.



Within the Cross Street Arena: Common Meeting and exhibition spaces after the restructuring. Courtesy of UABB2017.



Urban interventions, wall paintings and daily life in parallel. Photo: Gianni Talamini.



Open space to use during and after the Biennial. Photo: Gianni Talamini.



Architecture intervention and a new coffee shop popping up during the Biennial. Photo: Gianni Talamini.

Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture (UABB)

Since 2005, the urban biennial has grown to become a crucial part of Shenzhen's image; by continually changing locations it addresses the rapid urbanization within the megalopolis, and within the context of the Pearl River Delta. The biennial is the only one worldwide focusing on urbanization and urban processes. Since 2007, the Biennale has been co-organized with the neighbouring city of Hong Kong. They share the same concept, but their teams work independently. Nevertheless, the main focus is on Shenzhen and their immensely fast-growing cityscape.¹

The UABB was initially founded by the Shenzhen government, with the aim of promoting the city as the mainland's foremost city of creativity. The venues for the Biennale are always changing, depending on the curatorial concept and on the needs within the city as well: in Shenzhen, there are a lot of abandoned places like old factories or smaller communities, hidden behind the skyline of the newly built skyscrapers, and there are urban villages.

The Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture (UABB) "Cities, Grow in Difference" (December 15, 2017—March 17, 2018) focused on the topic of the urban village. The

excitement level was extremely high, as we are talking about a part of the city where people still live. This Biennale was confronted with dealing with a vibrant part of the city of Shenzhen, an urban village. So, the curators created spaces in the realms of urbanism, architecture, contemporary art, and the people of the city itself.

The 2018 edition was curated by Urbanus, an architecture company with offices in Shenzhen and Beijing, in particular its founders LIU Xiaodu and MENG Yan, and the internationally renowned art curator and artistic director of the MAXXI in Rome, HOU Hanru. One main venue at the centre of this examination was located in one of the approximately over 100 urban villages: in Nantou Old Town in the Nanshan district of Shenzhen. The idea of the centre gets blurred, since there is no longer one single centre as we know it from, for example, European city planning. The structure of a city is not what we are trained to know and keeps developing in multiple ways, and therefore multiple centres pop up. The idea of (de)centralising is not just inherent in the city itself, but within the idea of exhibition-making in this case as well. Nantou Old Town, as a specific urban village, serves not only as host of the exhibition with its old and renovated factory buildings, but it is in itself reconstructed and reconnected.



Renovated factories as exhibition venue and temporary installation by dutch designers MVRDV in the background. Photo: Gianni Talamini.



Old factory renovated for creative industries to rent during and after the Biennial. Photo: Gianni Talamini.

What is an Urban Village in Shenzhen? Urban Villages in Shenzhen: Arrival Cities² and the Future of the City?

Once the urban village was agreed on by the officials and the curators as the theme, the question of which urban village would be the focus of the Biennale was raised. The choice fell on Nantou Old Town. On the one hand, because all the stakeholders agreed on it, and on the other hand Nantou Old Town is well preserved compared to other villages; it still has traditional elements and has a long history as it was founded over 1700 years ago. DU Juan, Associate Professor at Hong Kong University—one of the main experts on urban villages in Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta and co-curator of the documentary section within the Biennale exhibition—dated the earliest settlement of an urban village within the area of Shenzhen back to the 5th century.³ Another distinguished expert who also took part in the 2018 UABB is Dr. Mary Ann O'Donnell.⁴ O'Donnell is focusing on the process of urban change in Shenzhen;⁵ she has lived and worked in Shenzhen for 20

years and can draw upon her own experience.⁶ The UABB is located in the Pearl River Delta, the largest urbanised urban area of the world, which is continuing to grow and to change fast with a very high rate of immigrants. Shenzhen mostly consists of immigrants from all over China (out of c. twelve million inhabitants, eight million are migrants⁷). Shenzhen is one of the mega cities within the Pearl River Delta.

Prior to Shenzhen, there were villages all over the area, and they were the first settlements in the area.⁸ After the announcement of the special economic zone in 1979, the City of Shenzhen began to encompass these villages. In the beginning, it was officially called the “rural-urban dual system,” and today these systems have grown together to form an urbanised village. Hence, “urban village” means a village within the city. Nowadays, the megalopolis of Shenzhen and the urban villages exist in symbiosis—one cannot live without the other. After the reclamation of Shenzhen as a special economic zone and the concomitant fast growth of the city in terms of its infrastructure and built environment, its economic rise was unstoppable.

Up to now, Shenzhen has best been known for its high-tech producing factories (Apple, Huawei, Diji, and a lot more), social media enterprises (such as Tencent) and e-business companies (such as Alibaba). But it recently started to become known for its cultural values as well, such as art and design places and the aforementioned UABB.

Evidently, culture is becoming an important part of the megalopolis, in relation to the city's economic, social, and political changes. I would even argue further that culture significantly shapes and is affected by systems within the economic, social, and political spheres. The UABB is both an expression of contemporary culture and a crucial player in the transformation of the culture of Shenzhen. This cultural hype can be traced by just looking at the numbers of exhibitions held in Shenzhen, which are rising, and by the fact that the 2005 UABB had 80% participation from China and 20% internationally. In 2011, 40% of the participation was from China and 60% was international. The number of visitors and the media coverage are rising continuously as well.

Besides this cultural hype, the places for exhibiting move more and more outside of the built environment: it seems that conventional art spaces and unconventional sites such as an urban village in Shenzhen are becoming important stakeholders in the agenda-setting of the future of these organisations and respectively of this megalopolis, which is increasing their importance on a national and internationally

connected scale. It becomes obvious that people no longer just want to live close to an eight-lane highway, as they were happy while they were working all hours of the day and night. Nowadays, people work less and earn more money, so they demand to live close to parks or quieter urban zones, like the urban villages. And here the potential to reinforce these villages comes in, rather than pulling them down and making space for more skyscrapers. Shenzhen promotes itself as a showpiece and a fast mover within China, and rumours say that Shenzhen is becoming the next Hong Kong. Hence, culture directly affects the economic values, the social interactions, and the political changes in the city.

Besides the UABB with its focus on architecture and urban processes, design and creativity are two of the publicly announced objectives of the city. In this regard, the promotion of cultural development was particularly spurred by the 12th and 13th Five-Year Plans (2011-2016 and 2016-2020). Hence, it looks like Shenzhen wants to open up this time on a cultural level to grow its economy on different scales. Another potential for economic growth is seen by focusing on design, architecture and urban processes. In terms of the UABB, there is a rethinking about how urban villages could transform to strengthen the city's further development.

Today, Shenzhen's art and design scene is becoming an important stakeholder: 2017 was the inaugural year of the Shenzhen Design Society, China's first and so far only museum dedicated to design (in collaboration with the Victoria & Albert Museum in London); Shenzhen was awarded City of Design by UNESCO in 2008. This is just to give the reader an idea of the complex situation and the growing cultural diversity that underlines the significance of the urban village as a topic and as an actual place for the UABB.

Surrounded by these changes, the urban villages with their relatively small five-story buildings are being submerged among the city's skyscrapers. Thus, they form a hybrid between a city and a village as mentioned above: the urban villages are a crucial part of the city but at the same time an arrival point for migrants. The villages are not just special because of their size, but particularly because of their different legal jurisdiction. An urban village is not governed by the laws of the city but has its own village laws, even its own village police. We encounter a (de)centralised system within a system from a geographical, economic, legal, and social point of view. A resident of an urban village does not have residency in Shenzhen. Often these villages belong to one family. Some of these families have sold their



Open space between the venues and furniture design for multiple purpose. Photo: Gianni Talamini.

villages for millions to real estate companies, who then pull everything down to build shopping malls or compounds as part of the new city. This makes easy and fast money on a short-term basis, but will this work in the long run as well? Others resist and work on developing concepts to transform their villages and take a more active part in the future of Shenzhen. This future is not just following one main idea, but consists of a multicultural process from the southern Chinese regions. Regarding the multicultural aspect, it is significant that urban villages function as arrival points for migrants. These migrants are not just manual workers, who come to the city to work in a factory, but also students, who come to the city to study, or young entrepreneurs who find work in one of the start-ups or create their own businesses.⁹ The typology of migrants is diverse and therefore the demands that an urban village needs to fulfil are diverse, too. Hence, the task that all the curators shared as their common concept was not an easy one: What could the future of urban villages in Shenzhen be and how would it be possible to “curate” something vibrant as it is?

The Urban Village as a Main Venue for the UABB “Cities, Grow in Difference”: A Pilot Project for a Research-Based, Hands-on Approach

Entering Nantou Old Town, you feel the weight of the inhabitants’ gazes—it feels like the visitors themselves have become an attraction at the Biennale opening. For two years, I lived close to another urban village in Shenzhen and crossed the urban village every day, but I had never felt so exposed. So, I sensed the special atmosphere this curatorial approach instilled right from the beginning. Many conventional aspects and venues could be found but also some unconventional elements, such as the urban design interventions. Let’s start right at the beginning: How do you find the entrance to an exhibition in, or of, a village? An entrance to an urban village is framed by a huge entrance gate, which derives from times when the village was a single village and not yet part of the city of Shenzhen. This gate marks the starting point and from here leads to a series of renovated spaces, new village walking paths, public spaces, themed exhibitions, research presentations, and on-site exhibitions scattered throughout Nantou Old Town. The ancient gate was not the only sign of the entrance; the curators invited several artists and architects to build sculptures in the surrounding green space, right at the entrance. So, Yona Friedman created a sculpture: kids were using the metal shapes as a new playground and seemed to have fun with these unusual

forms. From here, the exhibition path followed the main village street, which was marked either with signs or with remarkable reconstructed or individually painted pavilions lining the street and surrounded by daily markets and shops. These buildings were put in empty or unused spaces, which appeared in simple wooden shapes and hosted libraries or bookstores or small exhibitions curated by local curators about the history of the place; one contribution was an engaging game invented by the local art space Handshake 302. By following the road with its small pavilions, the path led to the main interventions and the main exhibition sites. In addition to the small one- or two-storey buildings, there were old factory buildings; the gates formerly dividing the village from the factory had been pulled down and the factories were basically renovated. One of these complexes provided space for the huge exhibition complex on three storeys on the topic of urban villages: *Global South and Art: Making Cities*. A second factory building was dedicated to small enterprises or studios or even just pop-up spaces for anything you could imagine within the sphere of architecture, design, and art. More than half of the space within the second factory building was still empty for the opening, and it would be interesting to see if and how that unused space during the opening is being used today. One of the most impressive parts was the regeneration of unused places; Urbanus tore down walls within the village and connected previously unconnected spaces. Some spaces were dedicated to leisure and kids play; other common places were nicely done with shades, so people could gather for playing or dancing while the sun beat down or during the monsoon-like rainfalls.

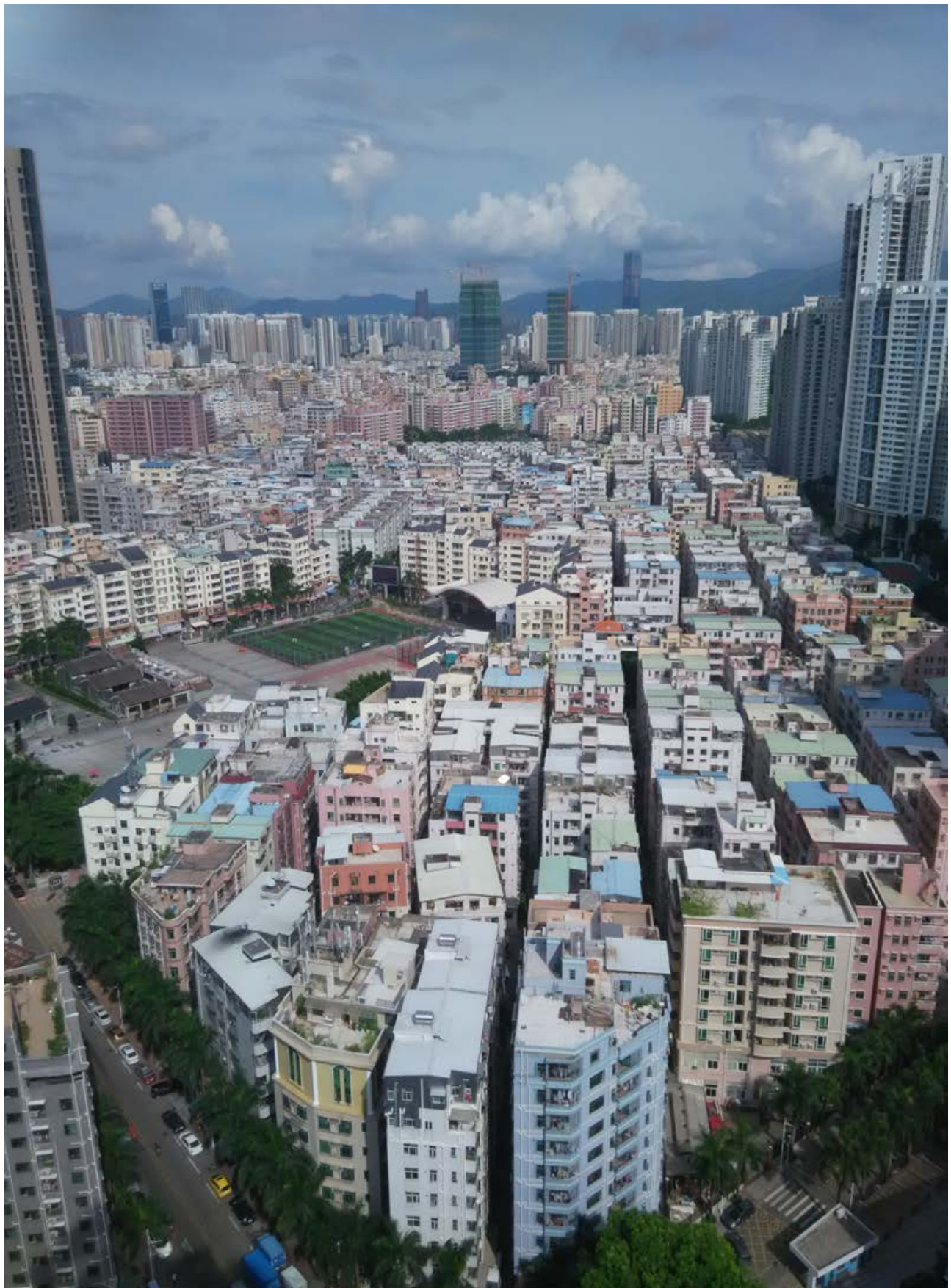
Urbanus states that they based this Biennale on “multiple perspectives, including historical research, in-depth observation, on-site intervention and future imagination.” This develops into key questions for me: Can urban change be a driver that can in turn change an economy and society and bring about a shift in thinking and acting? Can urban change be a cause or is it just a result? Hence, the objective is not just to show some art pieces or architectural models or crazy design stuff. The objectives, according to the curators, are “Diversity, Coexistence, and Inclusiveness.”¹⁰ These ambitions sound megalomaniacal but seem to have a realistic and intrinsic approach. The Urban Village section is a curatorial attempt that goes beyond a simple exhibition. Nantou Old Town serves as a pilot project for the research done and shows a hands-on approach.



Entrance gate to the urban village and the UABB venue. Photo: Gianni Talamini.



Entrance to the Urban Village and the UABB venues. Photo: Gianni Talamini.



Urban Village in the Futian area of Shenzhen. Photo: Gianni Talamini

The curators' idea of what their curatorial work should become is ambitiously formulated: "It [the urban village] will become a hybrid of an exhibition and reality, and of dream and utopia. It is a factory, a laboratory, a workshop, a library, a gallery, a playground, and theme park, and it is also a window into the future."¹¹

Rather bottom-up than top-down in this case, Urbanus opens up their research-based exhibition with a view to the longer term: "Urban curation, in contrast to the current urban renewal process, is a long-term strategy for the incremental improvement of urban spaces and the quality of urban life."¹²

Furthermore, Urbanus asks the most important questions of their investigation: "In a time of a new social environment, with the rise of booming new economic models and innovative entrepreneurship, are there new chances or possibilities for urban villages in the future? Is it possible to achieve a new balance between spatial regeneration and social reconstruction?"¹³

There is not one answer, but a speculative practical and hands-on curatorial approach that works



The crowded streets of the urban village. Photo: Gianni Talamini.

with the cause and not just with the outcome when it comes to rethinking what to do with already built structures. The objective is not just this specific exhibition, but rather the idea to open up our eyes for new potential spatial developments that could lead to wider changes in society. This extremely special curatorial framework makes it possible to create "space" for change.

Grown Future: The Urban Village as an Idea Generator for Urbanised Curating with a Real-Time Effect

Nantou Old Town is a place where people still live, where street markets still sell fruits and vegetables, and little stores sell soft drinks and snacks, a place where people from the countryside arrive without citizenship and make their way into big city life. A place where migrants settle, and different cultures create a new common one. Within the show, these places become urban utopias and try to take on real-life issues and a place where these utopias reveal a potential for an organically grown future with a strong past. An urban village functions as a centre within multiple centres in the cityscape.

Some aspects of this curatorial approach are positive, with some new propositions and some critical aspects to name. So, to what extent is this biennial able to change urban development trajectories? Through intervening directly in urban space while redesigning parts of it; by proposing visions throughout the content exhibited; by bringing international attention and therefore debate on governmental development plans. Here, culture is used to preserve urban villages of Shenzhen's historical and architectural heritage by bringing international attention to them. Hence, new places that have been put in place and can be used by the locals during the Biennale as performance places and after the Biennale as community places for what Chinese people love most: dancing or gymnastics *al fresco*. Further on, an old factory building was renovated, and the spaces are now starting to be occupied by creatives (painters, designers, artists, inventors, etc.). There is still a lot of empty space, and only time will tell if this will work, but it creates an inviting atmosphere. A more critical point is that the UABB is not very different from many other attempts to use cultural industry for urban regeneration. It contributes to a possible gentrification process and the resulting relocation of low-income migrants. So, biennials used forgotten space for their shows, but none of them really intervenes within the space, which is still populated. Herein we could find something encouraging for curatorial work.

Hence, if we take a closer look at the novel elements introduced by the UABB and their curators, we can see that urban design is not an end in itself—it contributes to an amelioration of a public open space provision and impressively shows that content coincides with the situation; the urban village hosts a self-mirroring exhibition about urban villages. It is a highly problematic context, with its active urban area and in the middle of questions to demolish these urban villages to achieve homogenous modernisation. Therefore, the UABB challenges these plans and provides a different scenario for the future.

What remains is not a unification of single art pieces, architecture models, or urban planning utopias, but a real-time scenario of restructuring not just a building but what urban processes and in this case “urban curation” could lead to. Every city has its “urban villages,” highly specific in their own situations, mostly (de)centralized, and kind of waiting to rediscover their potential. The Nantou Old Town pilot project, curated by LIU Xiaodu, MENG Yan, and HOU Hanru is an extraordinary example of rich theory-based research that evolved into a real-time project. The future is already there, manifested in the spaces surrounding us, and architecture, urban planning, and contemporary art are the main drivers for pushing these ideas and evoking change.

The UABB opened on December 15, 2017 and closed on March 13, 2018.

<http://www.urbanus.com.cn/projects/nantou-old-town/?lang=en>

Notes

1 Today, Shenzhen counts approx. fifteen million inhabitants. The last empirical data collection by census in 2010 counted around ten million inhabitants; please see here further details: <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/china/population-prefecture-level-city--by-census/population-census-guangdong-shenzhen>.

2 Doug Saunders, *Arrival City - The Final Migration and Our Next World* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2011).

3 Du Juan, INTI Conference Lecture on “Planning from the Bottom Up,” 2015, accessed Sept. 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8vYsD5aal8>.

4 Mary Ann O’Donnell has been recording urban change since 2005 on her blog: www.shenzhennoted.com.

5 Please see for further information: <https://vimeo.com/search?q=Shenzhen+book+of+changes>

6 Mary Ann O’Donnell, *Learning from Shenzhen: China’s*

Post-Mao Experiment from Special Zone to Model City (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

7 Z. Cheng, J. Chen, M. Wang, *Urban China in the New Era: Market Reforms, Current State, and the Road Forward* (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2014).

8 Juan DU estimates about 2000 villages existed prior to the announcement of the Special Economic Zone IN: Du Juan, INTI Conference Lecture on “Planning from the Bottom Up,” 2015, accessed Sept. 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8vYsD5aal8>.

9 The second generation of migrant workers is now settled within the city, and 60% are looking for non-agricultural jobs. For further information, see: Cheng, et al., *Urban China in the New Era: Market Reforms, Current State, and the Road Forward*.

10 <http://www.urbanus.com.cn/uabb/uabb2017/about-the-structure-and-sections/urban-village/?lang=en>

11 <http://www.urbanus.com.cn/writings/urban-village/?lang=en>

12 <http://www.urbanus.com.cn/projects/nantou-old-town/?lang=en>

13 <http://www.urbanus.com.cn/writings/urban-village/?lang=en>

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Shapes of a new future. Photo: Gianni Talamini.



The bridge which connects Hong Kong and Shenzhen; with a view over Shenzhen. Photo: Gianni Talamini.



The old village in the front and the new skyline in the back. Photo: Gianni Talamini.

Far Away, So Close: Between Congiunta and Piz Linard

Kristina Grigorjeva

In the recent history of contemporary art establishments, one cannot help but notice a partial migration to the periphery. One argument could be that this is the result of institutional critique; another and more pragmatic argument could be that this move is caused by the densification of the city centre and the consequent soaring property prices. But I would like to explore the other reason behind this development towards the periphery, one that seems to be more impassioned and almost sentimentally driven.

March 28, 2018, Zurich

In 1989, architect Peter Märkli bought a piece of land in Giornico and designed a building to house the sculptures of the artist Hans Josephsohn that is now known as Congiunta. The building itself is almost a sculpture on its own and attracts waves of architecture pilgrims to this small village in the Tessin. The building is not only architecturally interesting, but also invites the visitors to engage with the locals at a bar to collect the only key to the museum that normally stands closed but houses a collection of Josephsohn's bronze casts.

Peter Märkli's studio in Zurich is filled with memorabilia, including a beautiful Josephsohn bronze cast that quietly, yet very noticeably (much like the other pieces in Giornico) keeps us company throughout our conversation about Congiunta:

Kristina Grigorjeva (KG): So, why build this museum in Giornico?

Peter Märkli (PM): The program of the building itself, one could build anywhere really. And in Switzerland there is such a variety of places, villages, and countryside. In the city, the land is expensive. And in Giornico the place itself is already powerful, with the river, the bridges, the Roman churches. It is small, and the site was so ideally situated. This was the decisive factor, right? This uninhabitable situation, the relatively cheap price of land, and not solitary, but already

in a context which by itself is already rather strong. I think at the time, the Louvre pyramid was just being built. And this super-concentration in certain places is just part of the bigger story. At times we have discussed with Josephsohn that it could well be a little more decentralized and could spread a little out and could be connected to other places. That is why it all came together this way, the land was offered, and I knew the town already. We had a look and found that it was perfect, that we could try it out.

KG: So, somehow, you already had a certain relation to the place?

PM: Yes, Josephsohn would always take the train to Italy, passing Giornico on his way, and we knew the village from before.

KG: And did you know from the start the exact selection of works that would be exhibited there?

PM: Yes, in the discussions we had at the very beginning we talked about that and about his entire oeuvre, all of the typologies. Between the two of us we decided for the "reliefs." As you know, he had remastered the "relief." It got lost a little, and with these stories, these objects depicted in these "reliefs," there he obtained a certain language. To fill the "relief" with content again. And these were all personal stories. That, and the *Halbfiguren*. We agreed that these two typologies are the least known and exactly those we wanted to show. Both were ideal for a sequence. And because the sequence was possible, the building was then designed in a way to express this. This was, of course, something very new, because of this extremely constant slenderness. I have measured the widths of the streets here in the city. I just went to see in the narrower streets, how wide they are. So, the specificity of the building lies in this risk of this slenderness, in order to avoid the need for organization on the inside. Here, one starts to work with the height, where normally other projects operate with the depth of the space. Here, the height works with the slenderness and produces the required volume and space for the objects to work in the space.



Peter Märkli and Stefan Bellwalder, *La Congiunta*, 1992, Giornico, Tessin. Photo: Atelier für ArchitekturPhotografie.



Peter Märkli and Stefan Bellwalder, *La Congiunta*, 1992, Giornico, Tessin. Photo: Geoff Gilmore.

KG: There is also this kind of temple atmosphere in the building and this strong relation of the works to the building. Do you know of another example that works in a similar way?

PM: I don't know one. This is in fact the new, the unfamiliar. But the idea was clear. And it would be unimaginable for me to exhibit Giacometti's works in there, for example. Because he, in fact, needs the encompassing space, he does not need the height. And then the sequence is obsolete.

KG: The building was built more for the works, not for the village dwellers, if I understand correctly?

PM: Yes, that's right. The "dwellers" of the building are, in fact, the sculptures.

KG: And how did the people from Giornico react to the new building?

PM: You know, they were originally very impressed by the opening, when their village was completely packed. That was impressive for them. And now it is

being visited by the entire world, that astounds them, too—why and what for. But whether the sculptures interest them, I did not ask.

KG: And the villagers were probably also happy to be involved, after all, they guard the keys of the Congiunta?

PM: This was, of course, also because of the Louvre and all these modern ways... Firstly, one has to imagine, that for these bronze casts, these sculptures, no climatic requirements need to be met. We had no insurance; we had no special exhibiting requirements. I mean, the paintings in the churches do not get ruined. All these are insurance issues that catapult the exhibition spaces into this technoid world that absolutely does not go together with what is being displayed. And we could just radically avoid all of that. And then we said we would deposit the key at the Osteria. And then one can just go there and have a look. There is no entrance fee or anything.

KG: What exactly interests you in Josephsohn's work?

January 29, 2018, Lavin

PM: Well, that is a complex question. When I started with the job of an architect, I had no language. I had to dedicate myself to the language, the expression. I could not paint myself, could not depict figures. And then one day in the *Tagesanzeiger*, I saw an image of this work by Josephsohn and went to look for him, because it spoke to me. But through the emotion of it. More the emotional intelligence than the rational. I was young, had no experience, more or less. And then, just so, I had a means, an instrument in my hands. Because it was so perfect to use in buildings. I had found a means to do certain things as an architect. Then I did a lot of studies through drawing, also with these figures of Alberto Giacometti. But they are no longer attainable on the market. They were and will always remain studies. But the world that he formulates with his sculptures, and the world that Josephsohn formulates with his works, they speak to me. One always looks, or at least I have always looked for this feeling, these things, that have an aura that speaks to me.

KG: Do you think there is a general relation between the artist and the environment in which he works, be it a remote place or in the context of the city?

PM: It is comparable with Mont Sainte-Victoire, that Cézanne had worked with. Do you think the farmers saw Mont Sainte-Victoire the same way he did?

KG: Probably not.

PM: Exactly. And I cannot answer this like that. A place and an output, they have to come together. I think an outsider has this fresh view and is surely free towards the environment. And this freedom certainly lets him view it more precisely. And this has its advantages.

KG: True, and on a different note, the artists that come from these villages in the valleys, they tend to somehow use anything that they find around them. For example, Not Vital, had he grown up in a city, his work would probably be different.

PM: That could be. At the same time, art itself is detached from these topics. You know, anything could be taken as a departure for what one calls a work of art. A piece of paper over there, if you will. I mean, Segantini manipulated this to the highest degree. He was absolutely unsatisfied with what it looked like. He built the mountain silhouette anew. One could get into this topic more precisely.

Almost twenty years after the construction of Congiunta, a man from St. Gallen took over an old hotel in the small village of Lavin further up north from Tessin, in the valley of Lower Engadin. Together with the renovation of the building, he initiated a transformation of the village itself that has led to the formation of almost a cultural centre that brings cooking, art, music, and craftsmanship together. The building of the hotel as well as Chasa Bastiann vis-à-vis have both retained their historical appearance with their wooden interiors, lime-white vaults and warm Arvenstuben and now house Biblioteca Linard, rooms for workshops and exhibition spaces, as well as serving as a hotel and offering simple but refined local cuisine. Together they create a certain immersive atmosphere. On a crispy winter morning, sitting in the main hall of the hotel, the founder of Piz Linard, Hans Schmid, told me how this atmosphere came to be and why here in Lavin.

Kristina Grigorjeva (KG): I was wondering if you live here yourself, it seems you are somehow always around?

Hans Schmid (HS): I live here. That is, I live over there in the house with the gallery, and I live here throughout the year. Every week I go to the city, to Zurich. That's my short weekend.

KG: Exactly, your presence here is really felt. And what would be the everyday routine for a someone who lives here in Lavin throughout the year?

HS: People who live here work according to their profession; some are builders, partly there are also artists, gardeners, there are teachers, there are managers. Or like us, in hospitality.

KG: Before starting with Piz Linard, you were involved in cultural production in St. Gallen. Is there a relationship between that and what you have been doing here in Lavin?

HS: So, it is like this, when we talk about culture there are a couple of interesting questions, because for me the cooking, the dining, the atmosphere is very much part of culture, to the highest degree, I would say. And here in Lavin, I dedicate myself to this culture. And then there is another differentiation for me, that of art and craftsmanship. And there the question is, of



Hotel Piz Linard, Lavin, Graubünden, Switzerland.

course, where does one draw a line between the two and whether one should at all. But personally, with what I have been doing over the past thirty years, I have acquired a lot of interest and respect toward the craftsmen. All of this is close to one another for me, art as well, or culture, something that speaks to the senses, moves the senses or enables encounters or at least contemplation about what is the sensual. Here, we have classical concerts, wonderful jazz concerts, we have art exhibitions—these are, of course, rather a classic form of culture. But I wouldn't like to simply plant these here. For me, it is not about the name or reputation of the house, but rather about this culture the way I pictured it just now, with the indulgence, the cooking, the dining together with the crafts integrated within all of the above. And, of course, in that there could be a bridge between my activities in cultural patronage in the canton of St. Gallen, where I was responsible for cultural projects to receive either public or cantonal support.

KG: You mentioned that there is a presence of local artists who live and work here. Would you say then that the exhibition space here is exhibiting only local artists?

HS: Yes and no. That is most of what we have here, meat, flowers, cheese, all is from here. But for me, it does not have to be one-to-one. For me, the river here, the Inn, is very important. The Inn leads to the Danube, Vienna and then to the Black Sea. Not like most rivers in Switzerland, that either go into the Rhein or into the Rohr, either into the Mediterranean or the North Seas. The Inn here flows to Istanbul, into the Black Sea. And culturally, that is something very different, almost infused with the Eastern culture and has a lot more force in it, like gypsy music. There is a wonderful musician here in the village, for example. He is not famous or anything. But he has been playing free-style jazz for around twenty or more years now, on all possible tonalities of the clarinet and the saxophone,

Andri Steiner. And I don't do this out of this idea, that we must work with local artists and take care of the local art. But rather because it's just so totally emotional, that the primal meets the lust. For me, that is how it is, the local and the faraway. And it concerns figurative art as much as the concerts or the film nights that we have here. One could talk about that, the local and the faraway, or the mountainous here in the mountains and the urban down in the city, right? One could say it is rather urban, but at the same time very authentic, reduced and pure here in the mountains.

KG: Then, why here in Lavin?

HS: So, here is the thing: the lower Engadin is a rather closed off valley and within Switzerland very much on the edge. That is, it is an edge-region, with all the qualities of an edge-region.

At the same time, over generations there have been these "Zuckerbäcker", they also call them "Randulins". The "Randulins" are the migrants, and the Zuckerbäcker is a classic. Here, over decades there were a lot of poor folks. That has to do with the remoteness, especially in terms of transportation, right? Then the roughness of nature plays a role for the farming here, of course; whole harvests used to be destroyed. Either it was too cold, or it had snowed too early, or it was too dry, or I don't know what. And then they were always poor here, and a lot have drifted over specific time periods. Especially to Italy, but also to Alexandria, or to the East. And there they worked with their craftsmanship and creative strength that is rooted here in the Engadin. It is quite a place of strength, the lower Engadin. Mostly they worked as confectioners in Italy, and some of them made spectacular careers for themselves in Venice, Florence, all over. These are the so-called "Zuckerbäcker." They also became quite wealthy and would send money back to their families. That is partly why there are these precious magnificent buildings in this humble region. And at a certain point, some of them would come back. These were the "Randulins," or the "swallows"—they migrate and then find their way back.

KG: This is where the "italianità" comes from?

HS: Yes, there is the "italianità" as well, that is true. Historically and traditionally, there has always been this symbiosis or this tension between the departed, the returned, the mountains here and the very lively metropolitan of a city. Whether it is Zurich or Alexan-

dria. And exactly because of that, it is such a fruitful tension. Now, for me personally, Lavin happened by pure coincidence, I would always come here for holiday. But Lavin is probably one of the more interesting places in the whole of the Engadin. It has for a long time been in the shadow of Guarda, the next village up the valley. Guarda is a pristine Engadine village that has been preserved intact and has also received the WAKKER Prize, the historic preservation prize, because of its especially authentically preserved buildings. But there is something almost museum-like about it as well.

And here it is really rather authentic, lively in its own way. It was originally built by Italians after the big village fire. In 1869, Lavin burned down completely and got rebuilt from scratch in 1870-71. And this was done exactly with the money from the emigrated "Zuckerbäcker" and the so-called "Cotton Kings." For that reason, it is more Italian, it has the flat roofs. And up until the 1950s, there was an understanding that Guarda is the "pearl" and Lavin is "unrefined." Until it became a little clearer that Lavin is a lot more authentic than the museum-like Guarda. And then, of course, it has this "italianità" and this unfinished, imperfect pragmatic. Because after the fire, they built directly onto the ruins of the burned down houses. Our wonderful garden, for example, stands on the vaults of a burned down house. That is, there is a vault right underneath the garden.

KG: You have already mentioned this subject, but I wanted to touch on this once again. The more I speak to people from the Engadin or in general from the mountains, the stronger is this feeling that their perception of the world around them differs from, say, a metropolitan person. In one interview, Peter Märkli, a devoted Zurich resident and an architect, said, that "seeing" is a heritage. I can imagine that the eye gets used to the calmness of the landscape and somehow leaves the superfluous and concentrates on the essential. This makes me think of Giacometti, Segantini, and Not Vital, who all come from this area. Do you find there is a relationship between the artist and his/her environment and the way they influence each other?

HS: I find the topic quite fascinating and also rather difficult to address, so I will just say what I think about it. I think there is this image, that the urban context is somehow full of stimuli and attraction and this is not just a cliché, the city really is full of attractions.

Besides, in the city one meets a lot of different people. And these encounters can be either momentary or a little closer. That is not the case here. Here there aren't that many people around, and they are always the same. That could be a factor. The one question is that of where you look for social life in this limited context, because here everything is transparent to all, everyone knows one another. And that might then be the starting points for the creativity and reflection for these artists. That is in this familiar context. And this is very different for artists in an urban context. And the second is what I appreciate again and again, the contrasts of nature. Day and night, during the day it gets very warm and then it gets very cold rather quickly.

KG: And dark as well...

HS: And dark. That is another thing that one should mention, the light. This flat light, that particularly around November is especially beautiful because the sun shines onto the mountains with such a flat angle. I think it might have something to do with the circumstances, this nature with its rhythm on the one hand, and the small village context on the other.

Peter Märkli, a Swiss architect, lives and works in Zurich. Since 2003, he has also held a professorship at the ETH Zurich, and since 2013 he has been a visiting professor at the Moscow Architecture School MARCH. From 1972 to 1977, he studied architecture at the ETH Zurich. He studied alongside the architect Rudolf Olgiati and the sculptor Hans Josephsohn. In 1978, Märkli started his own office in Zurich.

Hans Schmid, initiator and director of the Piz Linard since 2007. Educated as a lawyer, he was previously in charge of the cultural department of Kanton Sankt Gallen. He engages in critical writing and painting, as well as building bridges between the city and the mountain. The integration of talents from other countries and cultures is an important aspect in his work.

Kristina Grigorjeva (*1990, Estonia) is an architect and an independent curator born in Tallinn, Estonia and based in Zürich. After studying architecture at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, TI and the Zurich University of Applied Sciences she has worked for Caruso St John Architects in Zurich, where she has combined her

architecture practice with diverse international curatorial projects. Her latest collaborations include the British Pavilion for the Venice Biennale 2018 and Gasträume 2019, a KiöR project for art in public spaces commissioned by the city of Zurich, as well as past and on-going collaborations with institution and galleries like Architekturforum Zurich and Kulturfolger. Currently she works for Museum für Gestaltung at the Pavilion Le Corbusier and is working on the ongoing exhibition series *detours*, that explores the relationship between art and the public in the fast-paced society of today.

The Zuoz Case

Heike Biechteler

The 7th Engadin Art Talks took place in the Upper Engadin region, in a village called Zuoz, on the weekend of January 27-28, 2018. The public art and architecture forum aimed to provide a prestigious line-up.

The E.A.T./Engadin Art Talks were founded by Cristina Bechtler and led by Daniel Baumann (Director of the Kunsthalle Zurich), Bice Curiger (Director of the Fondation Van Gogh in Arles), Hans Ulrich Obrist (Artistic Director at the Serpentine Galleries in London) and Philip Ursprung (Professor at gta/ETH Zurich).

Furthermore, the E.A.T./Engadin Art Talks sought to offer a “unique opportunity for the exchange of knowledge and experience between the invited artists, architects, creatives, curators, and art and culture enthusiasts in an informal and intimate setting. The intention [was] to perpetuate the tradition of the Engadin region as a place of creativity while simultaneously debating current trends in art and culture.”

The theme of the E.A.T./Engadin Art Talks, “SIDE COUNTRY SIDE,” focused on the rural environment. The 2018 participants included Aric Chen, Kashef Chowdhury, Claudia Comte, Bice Curiger, Rem Koolhaas, Niklas Maak, Mai-Thu Perret, Emily Segal, Pacôme Thiellement, Adrián Villar Rojas, and others.

The event was financed through various partners and sponsors, and the price for the registered public was a minimum of CHF 100. Students tickets were free. The Engadin Art Talks were overbooked.¹

The comparison to an Agatha Christie crime story with Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot as the main detectives is reasonable. Yet, in Zuoz, the venue of the 7th Engadin Art Talks, entitled “Side Country Side,” no one has been murdered nor has any jewelry or famous art been stolen.

Nonetheless, the snowy, picturesque Engadin mountain village, with its air of exclusivity, is a suitable setting for a plot to unfold. One finds Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot obsessively investigating the connections between the cast of characters and their possible connection to the mystery. With an illustrious cast of participants and guests, the scene is set for suspense and entertainment.

In the Zuoz case, the unsolved mystery starts with the countryside itself.

What is perceived as ‘countryside’ has recently undergone many changes. The countryside is no longer a place with a specific landscape.

The countryside as an idea does not simply refer to a specific landscape subject that might be painted on an easel, nor does it merely serve nationalistic territorial ideology, as it has historically. Countryside, as this conference revealed, is a patchwork² of many different phenomena, such as ‘Fiction’ or ‘mysticism,’ where the French writer and filmmaker Pacôme Thiellement imagined David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks taking place*.³

Unlike the fictive approaches, the countryside is also a place of many different political systems, which manifest themselves through the built environment, like infrastructural and building projects, whether they be digital, data, or distribution centers.



At this art venue, the patchwork metaphor also makes sense just by watching and listening to the different speakers invited, who represent different professions and come from different cultures and therefore have different perceptions of the countryside.

Rem Koolhaas considered the countryside's relevance regarding the two intertwining phenomena of 'digitalization' and 'globalization.'

Koolhaas' countryside collage consists of images that illuminate the breadth of changes the countryside has undergone. A 100-year-old Russian image of three women wearing their traditional costumes was compared to a similar image, taken 100 years later in Switzerland, showing a different population—housekeepers from Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Koolhaas then drew a comparison between Land Art and major manufacturing site projects, such as the Tesla battery factory in Nevada. This and Michael Heizer's *City* (artwork), which is also situated in the desert of Nevada, have clearly similar ambitions beyond their scale.⁴ Both projects became monumental icons on their own. Begun in 1972 and still unfinished, the *City* project is one of the largest monumental architectural earthwork sculptures ever created, roughly 2.4 km by 0.5km made entirely of dirt, rocks, and concrete and constructed with heavy machinery. The work is located on private land, owned by the artist and not yet accessible to the public.

Back in Zuoz, it became clear that not only was Rem Koolhaas driven to decipher the countryside phenomena. Why else did 200+ global journalists, architects, collectors, artists, curators, and art enthusiasts descend on the decentralized place of Zuoz? The story of the Engadin Art Talks in Zuoz began in 2010 when it was founded and initiated by Christina Bechtler, an art collector and publisher. It must have been a mixture of both her vision but also her economic and cultural network that made it possible to convert a geographically remote village into a cultural hub.

Zuoz is the typical example of a wealthy Engadin village. Its recent transformation lies in its identity as a locale for secondary private residences. The result is typical for many alpine villages: towns like Zuoz and others lie empty for long periods of the year, rendered into ghost towns.⁵ Besides that, Zuoz became exceptional for its transformation into an art village. This was basically generated through the renovation of the Hotel Castell into an art hotel in 2004 by the owner, Ruedi Bechtler, who is the brother of Thomas Bechtler, Christina Bechtler's husband. Both brothers are descendants of a family of industrialists and art collectors. Among others, the Hotel Castell exhibits contemporary work by the artist duo Fischli/Weiss, and site-specific art by James Turrell and the Japanese artist Tadashi Kawamata.⁶ Those works have been extremely significant for the transformation in Zuoz, since they have laid the foundation for "Art Public Plaiv," a project of contemporary art in public spaces in the Upper Engadin, to which Zuoz also belongs.⁷

The Engadin Art Talks are the natural consequence of Zuoz's development as a cultural hotspot in Switzerland's countryside. E.A.T.'s press release sums up the concept of providing "a unique opportunity for the exchange of knowledge and experience between the invited artists, architects, creatives, curators, and art and culture enthusiasts in an informal and intimate setting. The intention is to perpetuate the tradition of the Engadin region as a place of creativity while simultaneously debating current trends in art and culture."⁸

The line-up of E.A.T.'s main partners and sponsors, such as Gübelin Jewellery and the Swiss luxury watch brand Constantin Vacheron or the family foundation Bechtler Stiftung, just to name a few, makes one aware of the high expenses of the event.⁹ Besides Rem Koolhaas, the other guests, and their sponsors, the high-profile curatorial mix contributed significantly to the success of the Engadin Art Talks and its global attendance.

Zuoz itself was the new phenomena of the countryside.

Apart from Zuoz, the countryside remained a rather undefined phenomenon. Instead, what the countryside is not was clarified: definitely not something urban, nor found in the jungle or desert, but everything that is decentralized or remote.

The countryside can be real but also unreal. The countryside is nostalgia and utopia at the same time. It is the place where the human meets the non-human,¹⁰ but also where reality and fiction overlap. We all know about the existence of Robert Smithson's [1970] Land Art piece *Spiral Jetty*. We have read about it, and we have seen it in photographs. This doesn't mean that the experience of it would be the same. In Philipp Ursprung's case, he never saw the *Spiral Jetty* the way it is described or depicted in images, because when he was physically there, the *Spiral Jetty* was flooded. His personal experience and his narrative stands beyond and in opposition to the familiar story and the generally known facts of the artwork.

Mai-Thu Perret's art is defined by a story she invented. Her starting point and the motivation behind her work is the present political and economic status quo in a

Western neoliberal society: in her narrative, a group of young women decided to leave a big unnamed Western city to create an autonomous community in the desert of New Mexico.

Here, the artist's work is a direct reference to the ideas of William Morris, who himself imagined a utopian future, away from the horrors of industrialization and a mechanized society. Monte Verità was another movement where people met at the beginning of the 20th century in the mountains in Ticino to try and create a space of freedom from the perceived brutality of modernity. Both references relate to Mai-Thu's overall question—the question of autonomy, an autonomy that oscillates between retreat and engagement—to concentrate and to be away from all the existing *bullshit* as well as to strive, to be in the world, to fight, to demonstrate, to be involved, and to be part of the collective.¹¹

Argentine artist Adrián Villar Rojas explained his view of the countryside through his own experience of his birthplace and home, Rosario. Here, countryside means the hyperproduction of millions of tons of soy every year, which is then mostly exported to China. For as long as Argentina was a colonial state, belonging to the Spanish Empire until 1810, it was positioned by the economic colonial and neo-colonial structures as a countryside region. Its purpose is to provide primary materials to First-World economies, but what they receive in return are manufactured goods from other big countries, which demonstrates the hard reality of geopolitical inequality, where economic capital is the trigger for the production of agricultural countryside.¹²

As a future curator of the Design Museum+ in Hong Kong, Aric Chen presented the countryside as a place where massive new infrastructural projects are being built in China's remote countryside: power lines, dams, bridges, train lines, roads, and tunnels. These projects follow a regional political and economic agenda—on the one hand to increase the balance between the wealthy and not wealthy China but also China's geopolitical interest in being linked with Europe through Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

This primarily built, hard infrastructure only functions in combination with the soft infrastructure of the Internet. China's "Taobao" is the biggest e-commerce platform in the world and has been able to connect small Chinese villages and towns with the broader Chinese and global economy by equipping rural parcel drop-off service centers.

One consequence of this is that it has been possible to reverse migration and to make people move back to the countryside, where they have begun to repopulate villages, transforming their economies in the process.

What else did we learn from the "Zuoz Case" besides those different fictional and factual perceptions of the countryside, including the village of Zuoz?

Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot would have probably figured out that the unsolved mystery in this case was not the *countryside* as subject of the talks, but the setting and structure of the event in the countryside of Zuoz.

The rather formal setting and structure of the conference—divided into front and back, speaker and spectator—combined with the limited time of 30 minutes per statement, excluding the summary and some single questions, contributed more to the character of a show than to an exchange of knowledge despite the very elaborated curated event.

Both detectives would have noted a substantial gap between the socially relevant claim of the conference and its actual reality—that the countryside matter was claimed within an exclusive and intimate setting and hence stayed within its own enclosed circle inside the village of Zuoz.

The solution could be simple: to foster better interaction among the guests—speakers, spectators, and the village itself.

The claim of debating *current trends in art and culture* through *informality* and *intimacy* could have also been an opportunity to expand the idea of the *exchange of knowledge* in an intimate setting.

Prestigious and successful artists, intellectuals, architects, and art collectors, of course, create and even demand a special, aesthetic, and economic setting, which is to meet within one's own tribe.

The clash between the hyper-exclusivity and a hyper-relevant topic, present in each single, sophisticated but disconnected statement, failed to create a genuine intersection of ideas.

Where was the connection to the audience? What exact intention stood behind the sophisticated curated talks and speakers? What essence did the different statements leave behind—also in regard to the local village of Zuoz and the Engadin region and the overall intention of “perpetuating the tradition of the Engadin region as a place of creativity,” as stated in the press release?¹³ Was it only Rem Koolhaas' comparison of the old and new inhabitants or Mai-Thu Perret's fictive narrative about creating an autonomous commune, this time not taking place in the desert of New Mexico but in Zuoz? But if this was the case, some further (inter)action was missing.

One also could consider sharing this event within a more diverse and yet intimate circle, for instance, with the politicians and economists who were attending the World Economic Forum nearby in Davos or with a good mixture of established and non-established artists, architects, theorists, and curators.

It could be that then this talk would have been truly relevant and would have left something more than a beautiful memory of a sophisticated, self-serving, intellectual, entertaining event.

Or to put it in other words: Zuoz is real but also unreal. Nostalgia and utopia at the same time. It is the place where the human meets the non-human, but also where reality and fiction overlap.

Notes

1 Press Release, E.A.T./ENGADIN ART TALKS, January 27-28, 2018 in Zuoz, “SIDE COUNTRY SIDE,” accessed Mar. 26, 2018, <http://www.engadin-art-talks.ch/medien-mitteilung.en.html>.

2 Rem Koolhaas, “Ever Countryside,” Engadin Art Talks 2018, Rem Koolhaas, Emily Segal and Niklas Maak in Conversation, accessed Jan. 26, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyl6LUGtCpo&list=PLOTSzxU0ijuhSo9ELb_WZThkTXchy5tK3&index=12.

3 Pacôme Thiellement, “A bit of nostalgia for the old folks: You can't go home again (Twin Peaks, Mani, Nature),” Engadin Art Talks 2018, accessed Feb. 26, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6cq-5fu9hA&list=PLOTSzxU0ijuhSo9ELb_WZThkTXchy5tK3&index=7.

4 Rem Koolhaas, “Ever Countryside.”

5 Philip Ursprung, “Earth Art: Between the Human and the Non-human,” Engadin Art Talks 2018, accessed Feb. 26, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhRJVUp1md8&list=PLOTSzxU0ijuhSo9ELb_WZThkTXchy5tK3&index=6.

- 6** Feli Schindler, “Nach dem Kraftakt auf der Loipe ein Espresso aus der Bar von Pipilotti Rist,” *Tagesanzeiger*, Jan. 19, 2011, accessed Mar. 25, 2017, <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/kultur/diverses/Nach-dem-Kraftakt-auf-der-Loipe-ein-Espresso-aus-der-Bar-von-Pipilotti-Rist-/story/23757838>.
- 7** Hotel Castell website, accessed Mar. 25, 2017, <http://www.hotelcastell.ch/en/art-architecture/art-public-plaiv/>.
- 8** Press Release, E.A.T./ENGADIN ART TALKS.
- 9** E.A.T website, accessed Mar. 26, 2018, <http://www.engadin-art-talks.ch/partners-2018.en.html>.
- 10** Philip Ursprung, “Earth Art: Between the Human and the Non-human.”
- 11** Mai-Thu Perret, “No more city,” Engadin Art Talks 2018, accessed Feb. 26, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9-XUs09hYk&index=4&list=PLOTSzxU0ijuhSo9ELb_WZThkTXchy5tK3.
- 12** Adrián Villar Rojas, “The Battle for Intimacy,” Engadin Art Talks 2018, accessed Feb. 26, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GXN9tXbOGY&index=11&list=PLOTSzxU0ijuhSo9ELb_WZThkTXchy5tK3.
- 13** Press Release, E.A.T./ENGADIN ART TALKS.

Heike Biechteler (*1973) is an architect and scientific researcher at the Institute of Architecture at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts Engineering and Architecture. Among others she started a conference format, which aims to generate a swiss-wide, cross-institutional discourse on the pedagogy in architecture education. The second documentation – a glossary on the relevance of schools of architecture for the society, has been published this spring together with Park Books. Presently she is investigating in the tradition of representation in architecture exhibitions by displaying a building of architecture as a discipline by many stakeholders and perspectives - besides the architect itself.

Curating Otherness – A Selective Reading of the Diaspora Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale

Marco Meuli

Abstract

The basis of the arguments in this text are two installations and one artwork of the Diaspora Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale. I try to elaborate a possibility of understanding the political significance of diaspora in a globalized world. This significance lies – in this reading – in the constitution of affects that cannot be subjected to Western logics of domination and thereby undermine them in different ways. For the Western subject, the “Otherness” that is present in diasporic conditions structurally mirrors the general “Otherness” of art. That said, art is an extraordinary way to render this otherness (or otherness as such) tangible.

The discussed works of the Diaspora Pavilion are a beautiful opportunity to think about art, curating, experience, and subjectivity. In the following, I will try to build the ideas out of the experience of the works and installations. Still, it is my reading (in that way subjective), and furthermore it is a sketch of an argumentation. The reading cannot do justice to the works in its brevity and does not have the ambition to do so – but nevertheless it puts forth a general claim that can be referred back to the works and installations.

Introduction

The *Diaspora¹ Pavilion* of the 2017 Venice Biennale situated in Palazzo Pisani Santa Marina showed artists that identified themselves within a diasporic situation. Their artworks explore the question of what diaspora as a mindset as well as a political reality could mean in and for a globalized world. Furthermore, the display itself takes part in confronting and elaborating these questions.

In the accompanying catalogue to the pavilion, the curators David A. Bailey and Jessica Taylor position the pavilion “in opposition to the very concept of a permanent national pavilion,” presenting “counter-narratives that interrogate the critical capacity of diaspora as notion” and having “a topical interest in the impact of increased global mobility, displacement, and migration on culture,” and as an “approach [to] art [...] as a space of refuge – an in-between space of transition and of diasporic passage for art practitioners.”²

In this text, I will outline a reading of works in the Diaspora Pavilion that constitutes one (out of many) ways in which the political potential or the political demand of *diaspora* is articulated in the pavilion. To this end, I will discuss two installations and one artwork from the exhibition. My reading is selective and subjective and does in no way give an adequate account of the pavilion or even the installations themselves. Nonetheless, I hope to give an account of the political content and the aesthetic strategies at work in the pavilion and the discussed works.

Installations as such *are* artistic means to problematize, de-centralize, or bypass the Western subject. This idea is a crucial concept in Claire Bishop’s book *Installation Art:*



Fig. 1: Diaspora Pavilion 2017 Venice Biennale, *The Grand Salon*. Artworks: Middle: Michael Forbes, *The Masquerade*, paintings on the left and the right side: Kimathi Donkor, *Bacchus and Ariadne* (2004), *Toussaint L'Ouverture at Bedourete* (2004), back: Nicola Green, *Bate Bola* (2006). Photo: Marco Meuli

Perhaps most importantly, the key idea that emerges in writing on this work is that traditional single-point perspective is overturned by installation art's provision of plural and fragmented vistas: as a result, our hierarchical and centred relation to the work of art (and to ourselves) is undermined and destabilized.³

Certainly, this desire to “de-centre,” “undermine,” and “destabilize” the Western subject can be understood as one underlying principle of the *Diaspora Pavilion* as well. The pavilion, the installations, and the artworks give answers to what this could mean. In the following, I will try to elaborate one possible way to read this.

The Grand Salon

The *Grand Salon* (fig. 1) on the upper floor is one of the focal points of the pavilion. It comprises works by six different artists.⁴ The salon has a wooden floor, heavy wooden doors, stucco, and a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Its aristocratic origins are openly displayed. However, it does not seem accurate to say that the works (that refer to a diasporic situation) would not fit in the space. Looked at as installation, as a space that is designed, a specific dialogue is installed.

An abundance of colors and shapes populate the room. The floor is taken over by six sculptures from Michael Forbes' series called *The Masquerade* (figs. 1-2).⁵ They dominate the room and set the tone that is taken up by the other artworks. Each of the sculptures is made of different media, like small electrical devices, paintings, and



Fig.2: Diaspora Pavilion 2017 Venice Biennale, *The Grand Salon*, detail. Artworks: Middle: Michael Forbes, *The Masquerade*, back: Nicola Green, *Bate Bola* (2006) Photo: Marco Meuli

diverse African and European figures and sculptures—everything somehow distorted and put in strange relationships, thereby undermining the possibility of pinpointing meaning. This makes it hard to structure the experience of the installation according to a principle.

That characteristic (that we see in some of the other artworks in the space) stands in a sharp contrast to everything the original design of the room so obviously presents: the insignia of a tradition in search of the one rule, the one truth, of ways to control the contingencies of life. Through the contrast with the anarchic qualities of the artworks, this logic of order, structure, and power of the tradition becomes palpable.

Yet interestingly enough, the montage does not create a contradiction. It seems as if those anarchic qualities of the artworks would not care at all about the tradition with which they have been put into relation. It seems as if they would not care about the object of tradition of power and violence that houses the works, and that is maybe one of the main reasons for the existence of something like the *diaspora* today. They just inhabit the space and fill it with forces that cannot be subjected to the traditional logics of domination. In this installation, the tradition that colonized and oppressed the other is colonized itself by this other—but not by oppression and violence, but by a completely different logic.

This dialogue between different logics is supported by the other works that are exhibited in the *Grand Salon*. The series of portraits called *Bate Bola* by Nicola Green (fig. 2), for example, operates in a similar way. The catalogue accompanying the

pavilion states that the series “is addressing the meaning of mixed heritage identity through the lens of the Carnival in Rio.”⁶ This “meaning” that is “addressed” seems to have something to do with the fact that it is hard to subject the artworks to specific meanings and thereby control or dominate the work or the experience itself. In the case of *Bate Bola*, too, a multitude of colors and forms invade the space in an anarchic and specifically non-violent and playful but still forceful fashion.

A logic of domination through principles meets a logic that has the absence of any principle as principle. This absence indicates itself as exactly the freely moving dynamic affects that should have been kept at bay by the principle of domination. From this point of view, affectivity that is not structured is of great concern for this exhibition.

In the following, I will discuss another room of the pavilion that will help to make this line of reasoning more concrete.

The Bathroom

In a corner of the upper floor, a bathroom hosts an installation (figs. 3-4). Another golden *Shimmer Curtain* (fig. 3) and an audio loop by susan pui san lok, two *Lightboxes* by Michael Forbes (fig. 4), and a work from a series by Barby Asante are gathered there. The golden *Shimmer Curtain* covers a good part of the space. Entering the space, it takes a moment to orient oneself, to understand that one is standing in a bathroom. There is a large mirror on one side, a shower, a bathtub, and a toilet on the opposing side of the room. The *Lightboxes* of Michael Forbes are positioned in the shower and on the bathtub. The golden ribbons of the curtain nicely join the warm colors of the bathroom. Taken by itself, the colorful decoration of the bathroom would be too much – too fancy for a bathroom it seems.

But this time, the installation melds the given aesthetic qualities of the room with those of the artworks. The quality of the excessive decor is intensified by the *Shimmer Curtain* and thereby transformed into something else. The bathroom becomes a magical place: the design of the installation as a whole establishes a tender, playful, even erotic atmosphere that should be at odds with what a bathroom stands for. A bathroom is a place of cleanliness, as far as dirt is dealt with here. That is why the original set-up seems too much. It is not really suitable for dirt and shit. It is as if the original design represses the truth of the function of a bathroom that must not be seen. By taking up exactly this aspect of the space (repression through beauty, one could say) and intensifying it, the repressed becomes readable. The displayed *Lightboxes* of Michael Forbes make this sketch more concrete.

One of the *Lightboxes* is put prominently on the bathtub in the corner of the room. It shows a male colonial figure whose face is partly covered by a black circle on the left side and the proposition *Leave Behind White Innocence* on the right side of the box (fig. 4). Next to the colonial figure with the blackened face, the idea of white innocence immediately becomes a charade. Yet at the same time, “innocence” is clearly asserted to be a central aspect of the state of mind of the Western subject. And the fact of Western violence is related to this self-attribution of innocence. To request to leave white innocence behind and pointing to the blackness adhering to the “civilized” colonial white male suggests that innocence could have something to do with violence. If a certain *guilt* is the truth, the consideration of innocence becomes more than a nice mask. It becomes at least a defense mechanism against one’s own truth. But the causality seems to run the other way: violence always seems justified for the



Fig. 3: Diaspora Pavilion 2017 Venice Biennale, *Bathroom*, detail. Artwork: *Shimmer Curtain*, susan pui san lok. Photograph by: Marco Meuli.



Fig. 4: Diaspora Pavilion 2017 Venice Biennale, *Bathroom*. Artworks: *Lightboxes*, Michael Forbes. Photograph by: International Curators Forum.⁷

perpetrator of violence. Because he is right and the other is wrong in a way that makes violence the only solution to right that wrong. The function of innocence is not to cover up guilt – innocence is *installing* violence in the first place.

Innocence needs a rationale. It needs a principle that states what is right and wrong, what the subject should strive to identify with and what to exclude from him/herself. Such a principle that works by exclusion is necessarily a fiction. A fiction that constitutes the subject, the order of the world s/he lives in, the order by which s/he understands and experiences him/herself, the order that decides what can be part of the

subject and what cannot. But the manifestations of life are too manifold to all be peacefully gathered under one principle. As a necessary consequence, the subject will be confronted with material that threatens his/her world. The consequence is violence, in order to uphold the clean, pure, and innocent space.

To implicate that the subject cuts him/herself off not only from aspects of the outside world but also from parts of him/herself seems reasonable at this point. Hence, the subject is confronted by these dark parts from the outside as well as the inside.

To “leave behind white innocence” therefore suggests that confronting what shows itself is the only way to deal with violence. The artwork also suggests, on the level of imagery as well as of narrative, that violence is first of all a self-relation. A relation of the subject to the dark parts of him/herself that have been excluded, that must not be known, that are outsourced and fought in the other. The interesting question that is posed by the artwork is what will happen with the dark parts when they are not fought anymore. Both the bathroom and the *Grand Salon* provide an answer to this question. Beyond critical reflections on *diaspora* and the Western subject, the installations render *perceptible* what it could mean to “leave behind white innocence.” In the case of the bathroom, it could be said to operate by giving shit a new meaning so it can be experienced more freely. A moment of the tradition was taken up, intensified, and thus made perceptible. In the *Grand Salon*, the relationship to the logic of tradition functioned in a different way. They presented a logic of non-structured affectivity that made it possible to undermine the Western logic of dominion in a non-violent way. In this way, flows of friendly affects that cannot be ordered became accessible. And this made tangible that the unknown or unknowable can have a friendly face. This seems to be a valuable experience.

Notes

- 1 “Diaspora” derives from the ancient Greek word *diaspora* meaning “scattering, dispersion.” Source: Wikipedia, English entry for “diaspora.”
- 2 David A. Bailey and Jessica Taylor, “TACTICAL INTERVENTIONS: Curating A Diaspora Pavilion” in: *Diaspora Pavilion*, Exhibition booklet (International Curators Forum, 2017), 8, accessed April 20, 2019. <https://www.internationalcuratorsforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Diaspora-Pavilion-Catalogue-Web-version.pdf>.
- 3 Claire Bishop, *Installation Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2017), 47.
- 4 Michael Forbes, *The Masquerade* (2016-2018), Kimathi Donkor, *Bacchus and Ariadne* (2004), *Toussaint L'Ouverture at Bedourete* (2004), Nicola Green, *Bate Bola* (2006), Paul Maheke, *The River Asked for a Kiss* (to Pateh Sabally) (2017), Libita Clayton, *WHERE NOW WHERE/Typical Political – a domestic riot* (2017), Barby Asante, *As Always a Painful Declaration of Independence: For Ama. For Aba. For Charlotte and Adjoa* (2017).
- 5 See: <https://www.michaelforbes.org.uk/untitled>.
- 6 Bailey, Taylor, *Diaspora Pavilion*, 28.
- 7 Accessed 1.3.2018, <https://www.internationalcuratorsforum.org/projects/diaspora-platform/>.

Marco Meuli is currently working on a dissertation on questions about aesthetics, art, contemporary culture and politics in their mutual dependence. In particular, he is interested in how subjectivities are produced that are not built according to patriarchal structures. He considers art and human relationships sites where new forms of being can be engendered. At the same time, he works on exhibition projects that centre on these topics.

National Tourist Routes Project in Norway: Architecture and Artworks to Rest, Recollect, and Reflect

Franziska Herren



The elegant viewing platform designed by Todd Saunders and Tommie Wilhelmsen at Stegastein is 30 meters over the pine trees and 650 meters above the Aurlandsfjord. For visitors it provides an unique view of the fjord landscape. © Photo: Kjetil Rolseth

We associate Norway with beautiful scenery: high waterfalls, spectacular fjords, and glaciers. Tourists travelling through this huge country can choose between many impressive locations. In 1994, the Norwegian Roads Administration started a project to increase the attractiveness of eighteen scenic routes from Jæren in the south to Varanger in the far north. Mostly small but noteworthy architectural objects and artworks were to be developed along these roads in order to boost rural economies and rural settlement by providing tourist attractions. Such attractions would raise interest both at home and abroad.¹ Examples of projects already realised are the elegantly shaped viewing platform in Stegastein in south Norway, thirty metres above pine trees and 650 metres above Aurlandsfjord. It was designed by Todd Saunders and Tommie Wilhelmsen and gives the visitor the impression of floating in the air. Another example is the

waiting room on the ferry quay in the village of Jektvik designed by the architect Carl-Viggo Hølmekbakk. It is made of translucent fibreglass which lights up like a Chinese lantern in the long nights of winter. By the end of the National Tourist Routes project in 2024, around 190 installations should have been realised.

The eighteen routes are not connected. The idea behind the project was not to send tourists on a predefined round trip but to invite them to make detours and discover spots they would otherwise have ignored. The artworks and architectural objects were and are developed by young and unknown as well as established Norwegian architects, landscape architects, artists, and designers. One exception is the Steilneset Memorial in Vardø—a small city off the Norwegian mainland in the Barents Sea north of the Arctic Circle: in 2006, the famous Swiss architect Peter Zumthor and the influen-



Knut Wold's stone sculpture is located in the midst of the high-altitude scenery close to the rest area at Mefjellet.
© Photo: Werner Harstad / Statens vegvesen

tial French-American contemporary artist Louise Bourgeois were asked to design a memorial to commemorate the ninety-one suspects who were burnt at the stake in Vardø in Finnmark in the 17th century. What we know about those witchcraft trials derives mainly from court records from local courts.²

The witchcraft trials in Finnmark are a dark chapter in Norwegian history. Among a total population of approximately 3,000 inhabitants in Finnmark at the time, the percentage of people accused of witchcraft was very high.³ The authorities believed that storms, shipwrecks, and diseases could be attributed to contact with the devil.⁴

The Steilneset Memorial, completed in 2011, combines art and architecture. It is in two parts: a tall frame made of pine, which contains a fiberglass textile cocoon that houses a 120-metre-long corridor with the exhibition of the trials. The building and the materials the architect used relate to Norwegian tradition: the elongated hall refers to racks for drying codfish.⁵

The corridor is accessed via a ramp, taking visitors up into the core of the pavilion. In the somber space, the visitors find themselves in a sacred atmosphere. Just the slight sound of the sea and the wind passes through the walls.

Ninety-one small windows and ninety-one light bulbs represent each of the victims. Plaques hanging on the walls tell the story of the people who were killed on suspicion of sorcery. Visitors pass slowly and in silence from plaque to plaque. The tragic stories trigger consternation.

The exhibition texts were written by the historian Liv Helene Willumsen, who has been doing research on the Finnmark witch-hunts since the early 1980s. Louise Bourgeois' installation, *The Damned, the Possessed and the Beloved*, is placed in a cubic pavilion with seventeen panes of dark glass. An everlasting flame burns upon a chair, and a circle of seven mirrors surrounds and reflects the flame.

The artist and curator Knut Wold was involved in the project from its very beginnings. He works as an artist, art advisor, and member of the architecture council.

Franziska Herren: Mr. Wold, why was a project to enhance the National Roads with art and architecture initiated in the first place?

Knut Wold: Norway is a tourist's country—like Switzerland. When it turned out that tourism was decreasing, the Norwegian Government tasked the Public



The Juvet Landscape Hotel along the tourist attraction Geiranger-Trollstigen is built as nine small, separately situated rooms, each of them unique and adapted to the landscape. © Photo: Per Ritzler / Statens vegvesen

Road Administration with rethinking the national tourism attractions. In 1994, we started with a four-year pilot project. We experimented with two inland roads—Gamle Strynefjell and Sognefjell—and two coastal routes—Hardangerstrasse and Helgeland. In 2000, we expanded the project and chose eighteen outstanding scenic roads, which we planned to enhance with art and architectural works.

FH: How did you select the eighteen routes?

KW: We invited communities and travel agencies across the whole country to propose a route in their region. We got fifty-two suggested stretches, and then spent two years travelling those fifty-two routes. From those, we selected eighteen, among which the coast, the fjords, and the mountains and waterfalls were represented.

FH: How does the commission choose the places to be enhanced with artworks and architectural objects?

KW: We choose spots of outstanding scenic beauty. Most of them are already observation platforms, rest areas, service facilities, and stopping points. But these places are not up to date regarding size, safety, or facilities. With newly designed architectural objects,

we can improve those ageing locations. We also create new rest areas in surroundings with unique views. Sometimes we link hiking trails or footpaths to the sea.

FH: How did the selection process work? Did the commission choose the designers, artists, and architects or did you call for entries?

KW: We called for entries. We received 220 entries, from which we chose seventeen agencies with whom we now collaborate. We only asked the artists and architects ourselves for some projects, like the Steilneset Memorial.

FH: What requirements did a project have to fulfil in order to be chosen?

KW: We demand high quality, being unique, and an outstanding aesthetic statement. The projects should address the situation and atmosphere of their location. At one location, it is suitable if the architectural structure fits harmonically into the scenery like the Juvet Landscape Hotel designed by Jensen & Skodvin. The hotel is located in the northwest of Norway. It consists of nine wooden cube-shaped cottages with big windows. Each of these overlooks the most interesting spot. At other locations, it's more interesting to create a contrast, like for instance at the little viewpoint



The Steilneset Memorial in Vardø comprises two structures: a long wooden gangway which shows the stories of the 91 people who were convicted of sorcery, and a smoky reflective glass structure housing the installation of Louise Bourgeois «The Damned, The Possessed and The Beloved». © Photo: Jarle Wæhler / Statens vegvesen.



The elongated wooden construction designed by Peter Zumthor refers to a Norwegian tradition: the racks for drying codfish. © Photo: Jarle Wæhler / Statens vegvesen



The installation of Louise Bourgeois consists of a circle of mirrors within surround and reflect a flaming steel chair. It commemorates the 91 people who were burned at the stake in the seventeenth century. © Photo: Jarle Wæhler / Statens vegvesen

Askevågen on the Atlantic Ocean. The architects 3RW-Jakob Røsvik designed a viewing point of stone with glass walls—materials which contrast the surroundings.

FH: What should a curator consider if curating artworks at a remote location?

KW: The curator should reflect on whether an artwork is suitable for a certain landscape. Personally, I find it much easier to deploy a sculpture in a city. That has to do with proportions: in nature, it is much more challenging to appraise the impact of an artwork on the surroundings. A sculpture that looks huge in a city may look lost in a vast rural area. Besides, nature itself is sometimes pretty impressive. A scant plateau, waterfalls, and steep cliffs are spectacular by themselves, and it is not meaningful to add an artwork.

FH: You realised a stone sculpture near the rest area Mefjellet on a mountain plateau. It weighs forty-two tons, is in the shape of a frame, and has become a popular photographic subject for tourists. What were your considerations when developing this sculpture?

KW: I realised the sculpture in 1995 during the pilot phase of the whole project. For visitors, the stone

works as a frame they can stand inside. Some couples have already been married in it. But my initial idea was different: many stones travel from the glacier to the pass. I was interested in bringing a different kind of stone into these surroundings. The stone for this sculpture comes from a quarry in south Norway. The locals criticised the fact that the stone didn't originate from this area. I found it interesting. For me, it is crucial to reflect on whether it is right to put an artwork in an untouched landscape or if it is better to interfere as little as possible. Today, I would argue to do less in an area where the nature is strong.

FH: Many projects were developed by young and unknown as well as established Norwegian architects, landscape architects, artists, and designers. Why did the commission choose a world-famous artist and a well-known architect for Vardø?

KW: In the 17th century, a particularly high number of people were convicted as being witches and burnt at the stake, most of them women. The city of Vardø asked the commission to have an artist design a memorial for the victims. We were very anxious not to make a mistake with this extremely sensitive task, so we looked for an artist who is familiar with this kind of topic. Louise Bourgeois, whom I had visited in New York a couple of times, soon came to my mind.



The waiting room in the village of Jektvik is designed by Carl-Viggo Hølmekbakk. It is made of translucent fibreglass and it lights up in the darkness like a large Chinese lantern. © Photo: Steinar Skaar / Statens vegvesen

Throughout her whole life, she focussed on the themes of vulnerability and trauma. I imagined that—if she agreed—she would need an architectural structure housing her installation. I considered Peter Zumthor the right person for this task. I have worked with him already on another project within the National Tourist Routes: in Allmannajuvet, he designed four buildings along the old path of the zinc mines. I asked Peter Zumthor first. Then I wrote a letter to Louise Bourgeois in which I enclosed the court records with the protocols of the convictions. She agreed shortly afterwards.

FH: How did the collaboration between Peter Zumthor, Louise Bourgeois, and you work out?

KW: I coordinated correspondence between Peter Zumthor and Louise Bourgeois. As Louise Bourgeois did not use email, I was in contact with Wendy Williams, her managing director, and her assistant Jerry Gorovoy. It took almost a year until it became clear exactly what each of them wanted to do. In the end, we all met in New York at Louise Bourgeois' home. During the project, the curator Svein Rønning kept in touch with Wendy Williams and Jerry Gorovoy, and I was in close contact with Peter Zumthor.

FH: What was the most challenging task in this ten-million-euro project?

KW: The Memorial Hall. It was created from textile stretched with steel wire within a wooden frame. The fabric and the wooden construction have to withstand the extreme weather in this region—heavy storms in autumn and winter. So, there was a long phase of checking. The installation by Louise Bourgeois, however, was easy to incorporate. The artist produced a model. The artwork itself was fabricated in the US and then sent to Norway.

FH: Peter Zumthor describes Vardø as a “once attractive fishing village where today only a few boats are left in the inner harbour and the long wooden racks in the landscape, once used to dry fish, are falling apart. Many of the houses are empty. There are now hardly any living-room windows at which, by ancient custom, a lamp is lit at nightfall.”⁶ What effect does the memorial have on the village and its inhabitants?

KW: There are definitely more tourists visiting Vardø. That is evident in the hotel bookings, which have increased by around thirty per cent. The memorial is of



Apart from the Memorial Steilneset Peter Zumthor designed also new facilities at Allmannajuvet – the former zinc mines: an exhibition gallery to show the history of the mines, a café, service facility and parking for visitors. © Photo: Fredrik Fløgstad / Statens vegvesen

importance to the locals, too. Many people who were burnt at the stake have living descendants now. For them, the memorial is a kind of a cemetery. In addition, many school classes visit the Steilneset Memorial to learn more about the witch-pursuit in Vardø in the 17th century.

FH: Have you also achieved the goal of increasing tourism along the eighteen National Tourist Routes?

KW: Generally, more tourists visit Norway. And Norwegians, too, most often spend their holidays in their own country. As far as the eighteen National Tourist Routes are concerned, we have noted that some of them attract more tourists than before—others do not yet. In recent years, we have gained interest for our scenic routes model from several countries including Brazil, Portugal, Italy, and South Korea.

Notes

1 Jan Andresen, Foreword in *Peter Zumthor et al., Louise Bourgeois and Peter Zumthor: Steilneset Memorial: The Possessed, the Damned and the Beloved* (Oslo: Forlaget Press, Published in cooperation with the Norwegian Public Roads Administration, 2016), 7.

2 Norwegian Public Roads Administration, National Tourist Routes, Varanger Museum, eds., *Steilneset. Memorial to the Witches burned in Finnmark, Guidebook* (Vardø: Varanger Museum IKS, 2013), 2.

3 Liv Helene Willumsen, “Relations between 17th-Century Witchcraft Trials in Scotland and Finnmark, Northern Norway,” in Heinz Sieburg, Rita Voltmer, and Britta Weimann, *Hexenwissen. Zum Transfer von Magie- und Zauberei-Imaginationen in interdisziplinärer Perspektive* (Trier: Paulinus, 2017), 103.

4 Svein Rønning, “The Damned, the Possessed and the Beloved,” in Zumthor et al., *Louise Bourgeois and Peter Zumthor: Steilneset Memorial*, 14.

5 Klaus Englert, “Eiskalte Linie und Feuerpunkt,” *Tec21, November 11, 2014*.

6 Peter Zumthor, *2002–2007, Buildings and Projects, Volume 4* (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2014), 171.

Knut Wold is a Norwegian sculptor. He studied at Alanus Hochschule der Kunste and Hochschule der Kunste, Berlin. Knut Wold frequently works with objects in large masses of only partially worked stone. He was organizer and participant of the symposium Norge, stone, Lavik, with Makoto Fujiwara (1985–2011) and of Site-specific projects,



The viewing point at Askevågen provides a 360-degree view of the ocean, the archipelago and the mountainous shore.
Photo: Werner Harstad / Statens vegvesen

Hedemarken, with Wenche Kvalstad Eckhoff and Finn Aage Andersen 1991–1999. He is an art consultant and curator for the Directorate of Public Roads, the National Tourist Routes in Norway. He worked as a curator for the Detour exhibitions in Europe and the USA and “The Witch Trial Memorial” in Vardø with Peter Zumtor and Louise Bourgeois. (2006–2015) and for “Views”, Museum of Architecture in Oslo. From 2014–2015 he was member of the Commission for six sculptures along E6 Minnesund – Stange.

Franziska Herren has a background as historian and film scientist. She was member of the organizing committee of the Swiss Youth Filmfestival and was twice in the jury of the film festival Swiss-Movie in Spiez. In 1999 she participated in a photography project which resulted in the book “Tagebuch” published in the edition Patrick Frey. She works as a communication specialist, writer and editor. As student of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating at the ZHdK she researches on the significance of fiction films in historic contexts.

The Repatriation of the White Cube: How Should the Rural Capitalise on Art? A Conversation with Renzo Martens, Artistic Director of the Institute for Human Activities

Camille Regli

Almost ten years after the release of the controversial film *Episode III – Enjoy Poverty*,¹ Dutch artist Renzo Martens returns to the Democratic Republic of Congo with his Institute for Human Activities (IHA).² The new project is an endeavour that maintains that art engagement can redress inequalities. Inaugurated in April 2017, *The Repatriation of the White Cube* is an exhibition project with political, economic, and social ambitions. It questions the mechanisms of power and resources in a former palm oil plantation in a town located 650km from Kinshasa, called Lusanga, and the rural area that encompasses it, which together are

home to some 50,000 people. The town was formerly known as Leverville, after the British Lever Brothers (later Unilever), who were allowed to take control of the plantations in 1911. After decades of providing the capital and labour which colonialists exploited, it is time for the people of Lusanga to reverse the process and use their territory to generate a new economic system with more socially inclusive and ecological purposes and practises. In other words, the plantation workers have helped finance the Western art world, yet art may be the very thing to help invest capital and visibility back in Lusanga.



Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality; and Institute for Human Activities, Lusanga, Congo, 2017: *The Repatriation of The White Cube*. Photo: Thomas Nolf. © Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality; and Institute for Human Activities.



Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality; and Institute for Human Activities, Lusanga, Congo, 2017: CATPC member Mulela Mabamba's performance celebrating *the Repatriation of the White Cube* in a traditional Bapende Mugangi. Photo: Thomas Nolf. © Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality; and Institute for Human Activities.

Since 2014, the Institute for Human Activities (IHA) has collaborated with the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC; or in English, the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League) to form a micro-economy that can subsist by means of producing and selling art. In early 2017, the workers' cooperative CATPC 3D-modelled and cast sculptures in chocolate, using the materials taken from the cacao plantations. The works were exhibited and sold at the SculptureCentre and Armory Show in New York, and in Berlin's KOW gallery, which all generated and returned profits to the Lusanga artists. Not long after, the Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality (LIRCAEI) was created as a joint initiative between the IHA and CATPC. Together they commissioned the Dutch architectural studio OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture co-founded by Rem Koolhaas) to model and construct their *White Cube*: a structure made of white bamboo that represents the centrepiece of LIRCAEI's activities. The idea of the white cube as the modernist symbol of white dominance and representation of Western aesthetics acts as a catalyst for LIRCAEI not only to intervene in the plantation system with a post-colonial approach, but also to critically engage with artistic experimentation and cultural diversity.

Curated by CATCP, the inaugural exhibition of LIRCAEI featured works by African artists such as Irene Kanga and Mathieu Kasiama alongside international artists such as Kader Attia, Luc Tuymans, Carsten Höller, and Marlene Dumas. The event also represented the beginning of the "Post-Plantation" model; a five-year programme designed to slowly implement a creative workforce while strengthening the current economic model by allowing local communities to benefit from their lands.

Camille Regli: You are back in Congo with *The Repatriation of the White Cube*, which aims to bring back social, economic, and cultural capital to whence it originates. From the early 20th century onward, multinational organisations spent decades in the area of Lusanga exploiting the plantation territory for their own purposes. The wealth generated by these plantations significantly contributed to financing art, for instance, the Unilever series at Tate Modern. Through this project, you are trying to change the mindset of Lusanga's people by artistically and economically empowering them. Can you tell me more about how you started working with them, and how you have experienced the project throughout?

Renzo Martens: After having made *Episode III – Enjoy Poverty*, I felt frustrated that the economic, intellectual and artistic spin-off of that film was in global cities only, and that the film had next to no impact on the lives of the people whose circumstances it documented. In order to still think that art could be meaningful, I felt the need to strategically determine the localities where my art dealing with economic inequality would have an effect. In 2012, I organised IHA's first activity—a seminar on these matters on a former Unilever plantation in Congo.³ The participants included Richard Florida, Eyal Weizman, TJ Demos, Marcus Steinweg, Nina Möntmann, Elke Van Campenhout, and more.⁴ In the end, IHA was expelled from that site by the company that bought that plantation from Unilever, called Feronia. They said we were inciting civil violence. So René Ngongo—one of the participants of the *Opening Seminar*—co-founded CATPC in Lusanga, to make sure that they would be major drivers of the economic return that critical art could have.

CR: In the film *Episode III – Enjoy Poverty*, you state that poverty is Africa's best export image to the world from which Western societies benefit, but which does not truly improve Africa's condi-

tions. You've also mentioned in an interview that, "These people can't live off plantation labour. But I think they can live off critical engagement with plantation labour." (The Guardian, January 2015) From an artistic point of view, what impact or result have you experienced so far from the White Cube's programme?

RM: The White Cube is always a problem—its perceived neutrality masks the power structures and gross inequalities that allow art, as we know it, to exist. Even if study programmes in many global cities try to understand and critically engage with this problem, it brings hardly any solutions to the other half. It is time for the people who (in economic and ideological terms) have constructed our White Cubes—without ever having been asked whether they wanted one or what they would do with it—to take control over one and decide what to do with it. This is an educational moment for everyone involved. To repatriate the White Cube to Lusanga is an act that unravels white privilege and the blind spots it produces.

CR: Just to go deeper in this notion of the *White Cube*, do you refer it to the people who have ideo-



Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality; and Institute for Human Activities, Lusanga, Congo, 2017: Renzo Martens in front of the Kisendus hosting LIRCAEI's inaugural exhibition. Photo: Thomas Nolf. © Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality; and Institute for Human Activities.

logically constructed the White Cube, or to the White Cube as an idea of economic superiority?

RM: Certainly economic, but some writers argue that the construction of pristine venues for high art were necessary for the shareholders in order to separate themselves from the violence of the plantation system that they installed. In that way, the White Cube is very much linked to the plantation—in ideological terms, too.

CR: How much control do you have over the project once it settles in? Could you be “removed” from the project by other actors?

RM: Certainly. The land that CATPC bought through the presence and the capital generated by the White Cube is owned and managed by CATPC.

CR: To what extent is the White Cube programme engaging with its local community? Does it impact its neighbouring areas? Dare I say that it feels like an act of gentrification itself to bring a White Cube

to a developing country—doesn’t it feel like supremacy? What is at stake, and what critique have you had to face?

RM: As pointed out before, *The Repatriation of the White Cube* is the exact opposite of white supremacy, which is dominant in the white cubes that have not been repatriated. We called this programme a *Reverse Gentrification Programme* and—more importantly—we have been investigating the reverse of gentrification from 2012 onwards. This programme is now concluded, and we started this new programme for the Post-Plantation in 2017.

CR: So, now that you have launched LIRCAEI’s five-year programme, what are the plans for the White Cube in the years to come?

RM: Its programme is currently in discussion and is being defined by CATPC and IHA. But one thing is for sure: it is the cornerstone for the Post-Plantation: it attracts the capital, visibility and legitimisation for CATPC to buy back the land and start egalitarian,



Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality; and Institute for Human Activities, Lusanga, Congo, 2017: Luc Tuymans' portrait of Lubumba in one of the *Kisendus*, traditional Congolese huts built especially for the inaugural exhibition. Photo: Thomas Nolf. © Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality; and Institute for Human Activities.

ecological, and creative gardens that offer an alternative to monoculture.

CR: So, the resources acquired through the White Cube are funnelled into local agriculture?

RM: Yes, indeed. CATPC just bought 65 hectares of land thanks to the proceeds of art. There is much more to come. The White Cube itself is almost finished (there was no roof on it when we opened it in 2017), and the White Cube programme has art and agricultural workshops.

CR: I see that there are also plans for artist residencies and other exhibitions at the White Cube. Is the aim of de-localising art-making to get away from the usual creative clusters and bring new definitions of what culture/art is, i.e. to decolonise the narratives?

RM: Certainly, if other people make art and benefit from it, art and its narratives will change.⁵

CR: Given a magic wand, what would you change in the world?

RM: We already have the magic wand. It is art and its apparatus. If we use these, the possibilities are unlimited.

Notes

1 *Episode III – Enjoy Poverty* is a 90-minute film by Renzo Martens in Congo, where he states that, “Images of poverty are the Congo’s most lucrative export, generating more revenue than traditional exports like gold, diamonds, or cocoa. Martens started an emancipation programme in which he encouraged local communities to monetize their poverty.” Accessed Mar. 1, 2018, <http://www.enjoypoverty.com/>.

2 The Institute for Human Activities (IHA) is a research project initiated by Renzo Martens with the KASK – School of Arts in Ghent to redress economic inequality with an artistic critique/approach.

3 The *Opening Seminar* was a two-day talk and screening programme to inaugurate the *Gentrification Pro-*



Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality; and Institute for Human Activities, Lusanga, Congo, 2017: *The White Cube*. Photo: Chirac Kawusu © Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality; and Institute for Human Activities.



Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality; and Institute for Human Activities, Lusanga, Congo, 2017: The inclusive and ecological post plantation, financed by the sales of CATPC's chocolate sculptures. Photo: Leonard Pongo © Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality; and Institute for Human Activities.

gram initiated by IHA in Congo to critically investigate reasons for art to exist where it can have a real social impact instead of only benefiting wealthy industries and cities.

4 The seminar was projected as part of the 7th Berlin Biennale at KW Institute for Contemporary Art.

5 The first artist in residency of Lusanga's White Cube programme is the Belgian, Congo-born artist Baloji, who, in collaboration with CATPC, premiered his music video *Peau de Chagrin – Bleu de Nuit* at the 21st Biennale of Sydney in 2018.

Renzo Martens (born 1973 in Terneuzen, the Netherlands) is a Dutch artist, currently living and working in Amsterdam and Kinshasa. Martens is best known for his work *Episode III – Enjoy Poverty* (2008), a documentary that suggests that the Congo market their poverty as a natural resource. In 2010 Renzo Martens initiates the Institute for Human Activities (IHA), a research project developed with the KASK School of Arts in Ghent, which aims at proving that artistic critique can redress economic inequalities – not symbolically, but in real, material terms. Since 2017, Martens and the IHA started a long-term gentrification programme on a palm oil plantation in the rainforests of Congo to

create a new ecological and sustainable economic model based on art.

Camille Regli holds a master in cultural studies at King's College London and a MAS in Curating at ZHdK, Zurich. After the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne, she started working as Arts PR consultant specialising in contemporary art. She regularly takes part in curatorial projects and curated group shows at the OnCurating Project Space (OCPS) in Zurich as well as a performance in collaboration with Zürich moves festival (2019). Her curatorial and research interests lay in the exploration of alternative narratives/storytelling in the context of immersive art exhibitions, and the subversive aesthetics associated with performance art. She is based between London and Zurich.

Interview with Gabi Ngcobo

Ella Krivanek

Gabi Ngcobo is a curator and educator, and was head of the 2018 Berlin Biennale. The stated aim of the tenth iteration of the “outstanding cultural event”¹ was to produce “a plan for how to face a collective madness.”² Through the preoccupations of the collective work of Ngcobo, and those she chose as members of the curatorial team, one conjectures that this madness refers to the outcome of the impure and contradictory relations of the systems that have contributed to and sustain the late-capitalist world we inhabit.

Ngcobo has taken a specific position in relation to this through her practice. As one of the original instigators of *NGO - Nothing Gets Organised* in Johannesburg, she has examined the processes of self-organisation that take place in zones that she considers external to these regimes of control. As described by the Biennale itself, Ngcobo’s appointment was to examine “current global discourses and developments in relation to Berlin as a local point of reference.”³

An approach focused on going some way toward healing the “collective psychosis” to which the Biennale referred necessarily sought to reject the tools that have upheld the conditions in which it was induced. Ngcobo’s Biennale aimed to be de-narrativised, post-structural, and purposefully incoherent. The Biennale itself remains nonetheless one such system, in which the complex subjectivities that Ngcobo concerns herself with have not universally flourished. As it arrived at its 20th anniversary, this is evidenced even in the response to its “increasing growth and professionalization [sic],”⁴ to which it responded with a reconstitution and solidification of its business structure. Perhaps it is merely my own, blinkered perspective that leads to an obscure mixture of hopefulness about the potential for Ngcobo’s post-structural vision and scepticism towards the extent to which institutions can be subverted and upended for these radical purposes.

Ella Krivan: You once said in an interview with the Goethe-Institut that, “Decolonising means creating new configurations of knowledge and power—and that can be a messy procedure.”⁵ In what ways do you imagine that the process of curating, and the outcomes of the Berlin Biennale will be messy?

Gabi Ngcobo: In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), Frantz Fanon diagnosed decolonisation as a program of complete disorder that “cannot come as a result of [...] a friendly understanding.” If each of us does not start with the man [sic] in the mirror, like Michael Jackson sang, we will never win in this decolonisation undertaking—in fact, we will be lying to ourselves. Facing oneself is no easy task. It is the beginning of the undoing of a lifetime of inherited norms, of knowing yourself differently, and that can be a messy process. Decolonisation starts from here. In the interview with the Goethe-Institut, I was not suggesting that the Biennale will be messy but rather suggesting that, more now than ever, a self-reflective Berlin Biennale is necessary, and the disorder or a different order is therefore unavoidable.

EK: This issue of the journal is about decentralised art practises. The Biennale itself is one of the most established within the Western sphere of art. In what ways do you feel your appointment as curator of the Biennale may redefine or shift the boundaries (and consequently the centre) of the established art world?

GN: I would like to think that I come from one of the centres of the universe. This means that I value my life experiences and perspectives and use them as a vantage point from which I begin to make sense of the world. Art is no exception. Therefore, we cannot ask certain institutions or the Western art historical canon for approval but have to make room for experimentation as we embrace the unknown or the fact that it will always be impossible to know everything. The only way to refresh the art world is by taking bold and practical approaches.

EK: In the year of European culture, European leaders have frequently raised the need to create a



Gabi Ngcobo, curator 10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, photo: Masimba Sasa.

shared narrative. As a South African working within the European arts scene, what is your reaction to this desire for a shared narrative? Insofar as you will be a part of shaping this narrative through the Biennale, how do you define it personally?

GN: It is not because I am South African per se that I'm aware that shared narratives enable a modest look at one's narrative. It is mainly that very early in my practice, in collaboration with others, it became clear that this way of approaching the world enables us to imagine a vision of our futures that would otherwise be stifled, or, at worst, impossible. I am interested in art that possesses a power to stir conversation and renegotiate the systems of exchange, when different narratives clash, creating confusion and uncertainty rather than one-dimensional stories.

EK: You've mentioned the need to "guard terms"⁶ that are used in relation to specific marginalised groups. The Global South is a term used to refer to what were formerly called Third World countries, which was popularised in an artistic context by the documenta publication *South as a State of Mind*. Although it sidesteps numerical ranking, it is nonetheless directional and hierarchical, employing a productivist language that fixes the subject. How do you feel about the use of this term?

GN: In his book *The Darker Nations* (2007), Vijay Prashad asserted that the Third World was not so much a place but a project that was interrupted in three tragic acts: "Quest," "Pitfalls," and "Assassinations." For me, the South is not just a direction or geography but a proposal that helps us to imagine what happens when we shift perspectives, when we re-propose the direction from which politics travel.

I do not agree that thinking from the South is proposing a different order of hierarchies. Such views are dismissive and expose centuries of an age-old fragility of the West. It is this same fragility that led to many atrocities being committed in the name of enlightenment and racial superiority. The South is one of many proposals of action against the disorder caused by how narratives have been arranged to favour Western perspectives. These narratives remain undisturbed and continue to be oppressive when other perspectives are overlooked.

EK: Deleuze conceptualised the contemporary transition from a society of individuals to one of *dividuals*—"a physically embodied human subject that is endlessly divisible and reducible to data representations via the modern technologies of control, like computer-based systems."⁷ This dichotomy does not seem to fully apply to South



Dineo Sheshee Bopape, Installation view (detail), 10. Berlin Biennale, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, photo: Timo Ohler.



Mildred Thompson, installation view, 10. Berlin Biennale, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. Photo: Timo Ohler.



Lydia Hamann & Kaj Osteroth, *Admiring Elaine Sturtevant, the razzle-dazzle of thinking*, 2015, courtesy Lydia Hamann & Kaj Osteroth, Photo: Smina Bluth.



Sam Samiee, *The Unfinished Copernican Revolution*, 2018, mixed media, installation view, 10. Berlin Biennale, ZK/U Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik, Berlin, courtesy Sam Samiee. Photo: Timo Ohler.

Africa, where different social histories and forces operate than in the West. For example, there, the practice and understanding of Ubuntu is becoming arguably less commonplace. In your opinion, in what ways do these forces interact with the practices of globalised Southern African artists?

GN: Ubuntu is a concept that has been hijacked by the ruling party and used as a nationalistic and often oppressive tool. The current political situation in South Africa shows that the ruling party is getting less and less support, especially from a younger generation of people. This creates a space for artists to propose a different kind of humanity and one in which unconventional subjectivities can have a place in society.

EK: The Western Right is often said to look backwards to a beautiful yesterday (with the implication of white, Christian, patriarchal society). The Western Left is regarded as looking towards a beautiful future. Does this dichotomy ring true for you? In what ways can art and the Biennale contribute to shaping this beautiful future?

GN: I am not sure whether the Western Left might fall into the trap of romanticizing its “beautiful future.” We have to continue investigating and interrogating positions and epistemologies that determine our worldview in order to create a productive and accessible future for everyone and not just the select few. Imagination, fantasy, and dreams are as important as the hands-on, messy work I had mentioned earlier. There is no way around it.

Notes

1 “Berlin Biennale Blog,” 10th Berlin Biennale, “Gabi Ngcobo Appointed As Curator of the 10th Berlin Biennale,” accessed Feb. 20, 2018, <http://blog.berlinbiennale.de/en/allgemein-en/gabi-ngcobo-appointed-as-curator-of-the-10th-berlin-biennale-38166>.

2 “Berlin Biennale Blog,” 10th Berlin Biennale, “10th Berlin Biennale Announces Curatorial Team,” accessed Feb. 20, 2018, <http://blog.berlinbiennale.de/en/>.

3 “Berlin Biennale Blog,” 10th Berlin Biennale, “Gabi Ngcobo Appointed As Curator of the 10th Berlin Biennale.”

4 Ibid.

5 Katerina Valdivia Bruch, “We Are All Postcolonial,” Goethe-Institut, 2017, accessed Mar. 3, 2018, <https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/bku/20908725.html>

6 Ibid.

7 Robert W Williams, “Politics and Self in the Age of Digital Re(pro)ducibility,” *Fast Capitalism* 1:1 (2005), accessed Jan. 15, 2018, http://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/1_1/williams.html.

Gabi Ngcobo (b. 1974) is a co-founding member of NGO - Nothing Gets Organised and the 2012-14 Centre for Historical Re-enactment project. She was the co-curator of the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo. She worked at the Iziko South African National Gallery, and the Cape Africa Platform where, in 2007, she co-curated the Cape07 Biennale. Her practice has involved collaborations with institutions including Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Durban Art Gallery, Joburg Art Fair, Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism, LUMA/Westbau - Pool, New Museum - Museum as Hub, and Raw Material Company, among others. Her writings have been published in various catalogues, books, and journals. She lives and works in Johannesburg and São Paulo, but moved to Berlin for the preparation of the 10th Berlin Biennale.

Ella Krivanek is the founder of ongoing curatorial project Space Space gallery. She has worked with various galleries and cultural institutions, including Bus Projects, Melbourne; Block House Gallery, Tokyo; Info-Punkt, Berlin; and August House Artist Studios, Johannesburg. Most recently, she curated a group show at the OnCurating Project Space (OCPS), Zurich. She currently lives and works in Switzerland.

Kacey Wong: Art and Resistance

Giovanna Bragaglia

What is needed in the current situation is a widening of the field of the artistic intervention, with artists working in a multiplicity of social spaces outside traditional institutions in order to oppose the program of the total social mobilization of capitalism.

Chantal Mouffe¹

Kacey Wong was born in Hong Kong in 1970. His experimental art practice investigates the space between men and their living environment with a social intention. He was inspired to address political matters after the Mainland Chinese artist Ai Weiwei was arrested in 2011. This was when he realised that what happened to Ai Weiwei could happen to others in Hong Kong as well. Employing humour and sarcasm, his aim is to create platforms where social and political art can be seen by the masses.

His many stories and projects are based on curating resistance, through socially interventionist and activist agendas, in order to promote awareness of Hong Kong's political unrest. In 2013, for example, he began a mock design competition for the logo of Umbrella Movement (the city's democracy movement), which went viral. He is aware how social media changed the way one participates in social movements and that the real prizes in this contest could ultimately be justice, democracy, and freedom.

Usually, Wong's work is outside mainstream art spaces. *The Real Cultural Bureau* is a project that consists of a handmade pink cardboard tank that the artist brought to the streets of Hong Kong for a parade during the 1 July protests—a public holiday to “celebrate” the transfer of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to Communist China. From the tank, he threw fake money. In that sense, Wong uses the protests as the new gallery, reminding us that art can exist outside museums as well.

Continuing outside the white cube, Wong carried out a workshop with children that aimed to expand their observation, memory, and imagination skills. The streets of the city are full of exciting little things if you observe carefully, and he wants us to observe more carefully. The city is not formed only by big architectural buildings but also very interesting design objects, i.e. vending machines, mailboxes, garbage bins, etc. For the workshop, children were able to learn and create a

cardboard paper costume that they could wear proudly. The result is a wearable sculpture that relates to the surrounding space.

It is very hard to try to delineate his role, which would be something between an artist, a curator, and also a teacher. Nonetheless, he emphasises that curatorship is about collaboration, organisation, strategy, empowerment, and dialogue. It is about illuminating the invisible. For that, it is very important to speak the language of the people you are talking with. Art is not about solving problems. It is really about illuminating the problem; it is about helping others to see the real issue. He says: “My role as an artist is not to solve the problem but to bring forward the problem, to address the blind spot of contemporary art, to generate emotions through art, so others can be touched and take action.”

At the end of the talk at Connecting Space Hong Kong, in March 2017, he was asked where and how he finds the strength to continue. He answered: “Just being aware of what is going on around you.” Kacey Wong generously agreed to an interview by email in order to find out more about his thoughts on the notion of public space, be that streets or social media, and the different strategies of gathering people and be creative in public spaces.

Interview

Giovanna Bragaglia: In 2013, you started an online mock design competition for the logo of Umbrella Movement in order to generate more awareness for a cause, namely the city's democracy movement. Could you please say something about your concerns about the use of social media as a platform where everyone can participate?

Kacey Wong: I think getting people to participate in social and political actions can happen on many levels. The brave can choose to get involved at the front line, shouting and pushing, but what is more important is to provide a ‘safe’ platform (or seemingly safe) for everyone to contribute, and I think social media is that kind of platform. The mock design competition for the Umbrella Revolution Logo came from this idea; participants sent in their logo designs from their computer or handheld device under the security of their own

home, sometimes even from cities outside of Hong Kong, and they didn't have to be physically present. It is important to create this initial first step that is easy and safe in order to generate the participation necessary, then the subsequent steps of coming out to the real protest site will seem easier.

GB: Public art helps us not to forget the democratic and political character of it, being capable of proposing to each individual new relations with the world, with people, and with him or herself. Would you agree that all art is public, or at least that it should be?

KW: I think there is a difference between public art and art in public space. Many of the public art we currently experience in public space comes from top-down processes. This is due to safety, political correctness, or bureaucratic relations between various government parties. The resulting works are often compromised and dumbed down. Compared to indoor gallery and museum spaces, putting artwork in public space is much more challenging, since there are site histories and spatial issues to deal with. In a society that is heading towards more and more self-censorship, public art that exists off the grid—like graffiti artists do—can be seen as a form of resistance to authority.

GB: In your practice, you make use of protests as a context for art, as with *The Real Cultural Bureau* parade during the protests for July 1 in Hong Kong

in 2012, for example. How and why did you start to think art outside museums and traditional art spaces, and how has this changed your work?

KW: Artists always complain about not having large enough audiences, exhibition spaces, or enough funding. Protest space provides all three and more: the crowds are already there, the streets are wide, and the sky is the limit. Most importantly, the cause is there. I started creating art in protest space as an attempt to bring forward issues rather than using art to solve a social problem. Also, to push the envelope of where art can exist. It empowers protestors and is also an emotional release for me. Personally, I have to do it since I care so much about Hong Kong; it is about survival, and art creation is my tool.

GB: Do you think practices that are extraneous and critical of the art system can end up being inserted into it again? Additionally, do you see this as a dynamic relationship between artistic practice and its placement? Are there negative aspects of bringing this work back inside an institution?

KW: I think the economy of art can infiltrate anything. For example, the Land Art movement in the '60s tried to escape the capitalist system by going out to the countryside to make art, creating works like *Spiral Jetty*, etc. but the art market can sell the photographs of the site installation, so really there's no escape. The art system has many tools, and it can dissolve or



Kacey Wong, *Body & Architecture Urban Ninja*, 2013. Photo credit: Thomas Leung



Kacey Wong, *The Real Cultural Bureau*, 2012. Photo credit: Kacey Wong

increase the power of the artwork. One example is graffiti that is decontextualized and moved into shows inside gallery or museum spaces; its original power is suddenly weakened since it is off site. Of course, one can argue that institutions will make the work more famous, but it is a double-edged sword scenario depending on the artist's intention.

GB: In the workshops “Body & Architecture Urban Ninja,” where you work with children, you have created a way of teaching community identity through a procedure of collective creation and production. How do you think up different strategies for gathering people and forming an audience?

KW: I keep in mind that running workshops that involve the public should be fun, hopefully generating not only interesting physical artworks but also lasting memories. In other words, the art process is what I am interested in, and I think more and more public art is heading in that direction, rather than dropping large-scale sculptures into public space that have nothing to do with the people there. Also, art intervention is another key to be considered—if a work suddenly appears, it sometimes can create the maximum art effect, since the reaction from passers-by will be honest and in your face. The difference between gallery and museum-goers and a passer-by in the street is that the passer-by is actually an accidental viewer, whereas gallery-goers are already looking for art. This makes creating art and gathering people and audiences in the public space much more challenging.

GB: To you, where does the radicality of art reside today?

KW: Protest Art, Activist Art, and Resistance Art will continue to be the forefront of radical art. The world is more and more dominated by dictators like Trump, Putin, and Xi Jinping, and the spirit of the times is resistance. Perhaps the ingredients for art that are needed most in today's twisted world are courage and hope, putting the radicality of art to good use for the benefit of our society.

Notes

1 “Chantal Mouffe. “Agonistics, Thinking the World Politically”. Verso: London, New York, 2013, p. 87.

Dr. Kacey Wong (b. 1970, Hong Kong) studied architecture at Cornell University and received his Master of Fine Arts degree from the Chelsea School of Art and Design and his Doctorate of Fine Arts degree from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. He is the founding member of Art Citizens, Street Design Union, Umbrella Movement Art Preservation, and former curator and member of Para/Site Art Space. Also a former Assistant Professor at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, School of Design's Environment and Interior Design Discipline, he is currently an Examiner of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. He was the winner of the Best Artist Award in 2010, Rising Artist Award and Outstanding Arts Education Award given by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council in 2003.

Giovanna Bragaglia (b. 1986, São Paulo, Brazil) is an independent curator based in Zurich. She has worked in contemporary art institutions in Brazil, such as Paço das Artes, São Paulo, and Instituto Moreira Salles, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Poços de Caldas. In 2018, she graduated from the MAS in Curating at Zurich University of the Arts. She has curated a range of versatile exhibitions spanning an interesting gamut of topics. She curated Silvan Kälín: *Homo Viator*, at OnCurating Project Space, in Zurich (2018), the itinerant exhibition *Alice Brill: Impressões ao rés do chão*, Instituto Moreira Salles (2015-2019), and co-curated the exhibitions *De-colonizing Art institutions*, and *Say The Same Thing*, at the OnCurating Project Space, in Zurich (2017), and *Processos Públicos*, Paço das Artes, in São Paulo (2010).

Poetics of Topological Secrecy

An Interview with Lukas Sander

Miwa Negoro

In his 2017 site-specific work *DEUS IN MACHINA*,¹ scenographer Lukas Sander created an immersive sound installation in a historical gas tank in a suburb of the city of Zurich: the gasometer in Schlieren, the remains of an industrial site built at the end of the 19th century. Inside the cylindrical gas tank, the artist created a dystopian theatrical setting which the visitor was invited to explore. Once entering the gas tank, the audience suddenly finds themselves in another world. Rusty boots, scale, and buckets lie scattered, and 15-metre-high scaffoldings stand in a bottomless-like pool of water. An unmanned boat floats on the surface. Taking further steps down the stairs into the uncanny situation, the audience witnesses the whole complexity of mechanical structures in a fog. One must wonder what is real and what is fiction here—it looks as if time stopped some time ago. Despite being an institutional operation (by Theaterhaus Gessnerallee Zurich), its public access was subject to limitations. This interview was conducted to discuss the challenge of working not only with topographical but also metaphorical remoteness, in the context of theatrical approaches to installation-making.

Miwa Negoro: Could you tell us how the project in such a specific location started? What got you interested in working on the site?

Lukas Sander: It was spring two years ago when I visited the neighbourhood for the first time. I was always curious about the area, which was an edge of the city, wondering what comes after Altstetten or even after Schlieren. Looking at the Google map, I knew the gasometer stood there. I was scouting possible sites by bike, which I actually often do, and I was checking out the surroundings—old factory-like buildings, etc. I thought it could be interesting to look inside the gas tank, because there might be very special acoustics. It took some time to actually reach the key person who later showed me inside. I still remember when I entered the space for the first time, and I instantly got interested in its atmosphere. The boat was floating in the water. I thought it looked not only

like a theatre but almost like an opera stage. So, it was a kind of coincidence that I found the space.

MN: How did you start working with the existing space and materials? Could you elaborate on the production process?

LS: I did a lot of research about the gasometer and asked people who still manage modern power plants. I did not find that much online, but the wife of a former worker gave me a lot of information. My research covered the industrial history in general, and I realised that there weren't that many gas tanks like it. For example, there are quite a lot of them in Germany, but not in Switzerland. The other part of the "research" was more practical: simply spending time there, testing acoustics and lighting, trying to manipulate, hack, or amplify the found conditions of the space with the sound composer Christian Berkes. You can't change the existing structures, and the first thing was actually taking away all the trash and things I didn't need. It was a rather subtractive way of working.

MN: The title seems to refer the plot technique "Deus ex machina," which is used for an unexpected intervention. At the same time, considering the site as a former symbol of modern achievement, it may imply questions about the advances and limits of technology. What was the idea behind that? How did you engage with the history of the site and develop it into your scenographic thoughts?

LS: It was rather an abstract kind of thinking that formed the installation. On one hand, the title refers to an invisible means of theatre, that is, an effect of invisible energy. On the other hand, the place itself is a former gas tank, a container of invisible energy. A person who works at the adjacent gas power plant told me that it could still work. Whether this is true or not, the place is abandoned but active in a way. I like this correlation between theatrical and industrial. I also thought about the mythology and meaning of "rusted." Also, sounds play a significant role in my work.



Courtesy of the artist.

Nothing makes any noise inside; however, since a railway passes nearby, one hears its acoustic event being stretched. This contributed to the experience with a sense of stopping time. You hear the outside through the filter of the steel structure that has stretched and slowed time down.

MN: Even though the sounds enhanced its theatricality, there were no linear narratives within the installation.

LS: It is more of an atmospheric construction than a narrative. The audience doesn't really know if it is fictional or real, what is a part of the installation and what is not. I prefer to provide the freedom to spend time, find your way, and experience the present of the site. The installation was minimalistic and immersive, but there was a lot of freedom to think on your own. Also, there was no information, neither speech nor text. I hope the in-between experience spoke to the audience more than what was told.

MN: In fact, access to the installation was limited. The tank could not accept a large audience at one time; however, such a restriction ultimately made the experience unique and relocated the position of the spectator. The audience could explore and stay in the situation as much as they wanted, while at the same time they had to decide and find their way. Could you tell us your thoughts on such a position of the visitor?

LS: The position of a visitor is similar to that of me entering the place for the first time: discovering a site, finding things on your own, and building your narratives. One visitor recounted the experience as going to the place to die and letting oneself decide whether to go further or not. American playwright Gertrude Stein

describes theatre as landscape, that you can read them on your own. In the theatre, there are so many levels and layers of signs and metaphors, she said, and time lags occur. In my work, just simply sounds exist and you are invited to explore.

MN: In a way, your installation uses an urban space as a theatrical stage. How do you see the potentiality of using a historical site in the city, instead of being in an institution?

Lukas Sander: In my work, everything is not always constructed. There are things which exist already at the site, and the installation shows what could happen. The aim of my approach is not constructing an absolute setting under my control, but rather a state of in-between by adding fictions into a reality. Yet, a pure realism does not interest me. A bit of theatrical method is needed in this sense to let a poetic realism evolve in your perception. In my past work *ENDE DER WELT* (2012), taking place at the edge of the city under the highway where people normally don't go, the visitor heard the noise of the highway, and they would witness the car that looked as if it had dropped from there. I am always surprised at how much can be believed. Also, because of looping sounds, the audience wouldn't know when such a situation started. There is no beginning or ending. A place does not care if one comes or not. The line between what is constructed and what is not is blurred. Only then can an atmospheric construction function. Such a suspense of what is real or fictional can only be created by a location outside of institutions.

MN: What is the challenge for such projects?

LS: The most important but difficult thing is to find the right place. Instead of starting from text as scenography normally does, I want to find a place first, and create possible narratives out of the place. A visitor feels natural and at the same time unnatural, because it is amplified.

MN: The audience needed to be picked up at the meeting point and transported to the site by car. How do you see remoteness as such, and why do you think remoteness is significant for your work?

LS: The car transport was an institutional necessity to realize the work, but of course the journey already set a mood. (For *DEUS IN MACHINA*, a radio in the car played *Orfeo* by Monteverdi.) Remoteness has been a

key element of my works, and it indeed brings the theme a conscious edge of knowing the city. However, I don't necessarily need remote, derelict, or old sites. I could also imagine doing a project in a clean office in the city centre, for example. My focus is rather the poetics of secrecy, unknown and unusual. It is not about a topological distance.

MN: Would you say your focus is not historical importance but rather invisibility in the city?

LS: Absolutely. It is important to know the history, and some details and ideas of the objects placed in the installation have something to do with the site specificity. But the work itself does not have to explain the history or anything. Leaving the space empty but filling it with sounds that evoke images rather than objects. I'm trying to seek the right way to build emptiness. It is invisible but strong.

Notes

1 A production of *DEUS IN MACHINA* in 2017 by Lukas Sander in coproduction with the Zurich University of the Arts and Theaterhaus Gessnerallee Zurich.

Lukas Sander (b.1983 Berlin/DE) studied scenography and exhibition design at the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe and in the master's program Theatre/Bühnenbild at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). Since 2008, he has worked as a stage and costume designer mainly in Germany and Switzerland, and he creates scenographic sound installations in artistic contexts, including the Biennale Bern in 2014. Sander is a founding member of several artist groups and associations in the independent theatre scene in Switzerland. Currently, he lives in Zurich. <http://www.lukassander.com/>

Miwa Negoro is an independent curator, currently based in Berlin. Her recent curatorial work includes *Parallax Trading, das weisse haus*, Vienna, 2019; *my grammar and (y)ours?*, OnCurating Project Space, Zurich, 2018; a solo exhibition of Aya Momose, *Borrowing the Other Eye*, ESPACE DIAPHANES, Berlin, 2018.



Courtesy of the artist.

Interview with Olaf Kühnemann

Oliver Rico

Oliver Rico (OR): Olaf, having read interviews and exhibition catalogues, I thought your “nomadic” lifestyle would be a perfect match for our topic of decentralised exhibition-making. Decentralised in this context can firstly mean art that is not created or exhibited at art centres (or in cities) and, secondly, art that questions, displaces, or argues against the centre, or simply puts something on display that cannot be understood in the context of the “centre.” On account of your many different stations in life, you seem to have never had a centre, a proper anchor, that you could use as a reference point. That’s why I would like to know how you make your work and what influences it. I read the following in an interview you gave: “Sometimes I envy people who feel at home in a language and an identity and who create an artwork that tells a clear story. Ambiguity rules my work. Everything I do begins and ends with a question mark, not with a statement.”¹ Is that why you turned to family photographs, because you wanted to find an “anchor” or needed a “centre”?

Olaf Kühnemann (OK): At the time, yes, but that was ten years ago. I started with this series of images around the year 2000 and worked intensively on it for ten years. Then I moved from Tel Aviv to Berlin. Zvi Lachman, a professor of art from Israel, was a kind of anchor. He had a strong presence and a huge impact on my artistic identity. No doubt because I was very young—I was ten years old when I first met him, and he was like a father figure. I left Israel and went to New York when I was eighteen. Living in New York was like being in a bubble. I was not a part of the art scene, knew very little about the power structures and the politics prevalent in the world of art. I was very focused on my painting. Predominantly classical painting. That was another important anchor. I had time to engage with art and with painting, but I also felt I had no voice. I was just a student, an apprentice.

Then I went back to Israel and had another identity crisis there. Although I had studied under Lachman and although he is deeply rooted in Israeli art, culture, and identity, he didn’t show us any Israeli art—he showed us Rembrandt, Giacometti, Michelangelo, and

the Impressionists. We copied Western art history. I was in Israel, in a country that belongs where? To the West? To the East? Or to both West and East, somehow on the border? Back in Israel, I really asked myself: “Who am I in this whole story?” Then, aged twenty-five and influenced by George Baselitz, I tried out all sorts of stuff, went in many different directions. At the same time, I got a job as a gallery assistant in Israel’s most well-established commercial gallery. Ultimately, I realised that no one could see my paintings; they didn’t exist, so to speak. I gave up my job; I could now concentrate on my art. That was when I discovered my family photographs. I understood, then, that it was personal, my history. I understood for the first time that it could be a subject for my painting. It also enabled me to think about myself and my family and my identity. So I spent ten years painting about the subject. In the meantime, I exhibited my paintings in galleries and museums. Reviews were written, and I was perceived as an artist in Israel. Israel was an important centre for me. But, as we all know, Israel is complicated and a small country. You are inevitably restricted due to its size and geographic location. If you want to get ahead as an artist, you have no choice but to travel.

OR: What motivated you to move to Berlin alongside the professional reasons you mention? You could have stayed in Israel. Or is there something special about these places—Berlin, London or New York—that encourages being an artist?

OK: I am still here in Berlin after ten years. I had never thought I would be here for so long. It was an adventure to start with. My wife and I wanted to get to know something different. A new country where we could go with two children. And, of course, because Berlin is an art centre. But it was more personal. I am German and have a German passport. It was important to me to live in Germany. I was not born in Germany, I had never lived in Germany, and didn’t really have a clue what it means to be German. It was a very good combination, being in an artistic centre and, at the age of thirty-five, finding out more about myself, my German side. However, it has been important to us to remain in touch with Israel to this day. German and Israeli his-



Olaf Kühnemann, *Birthday*, 2006: Oil on Canvas, 95x135 cm. Photo: Ilit Azoulay © Olaf Kühnemann.

tory is also very interesting. These are the reasons why Berlin made the most sense for me.

OR: Now, how does being a well-known Israeli artist and recipient of a number of awards who, according to Thames & Hudson, counts among the “100 Painters of Tomorrow,” influence your creative practice? Would you say you were more creative or motivated when you were disconnected from the art scene?

OK: Motivated yes, but you have to look at it from different aspects. When I was eighteen and in New York, I thought I was already grown up. I was very lucky to have been able to attend two renowned art schools. I worked a lot to earn money, but at the end of the day to study and make art is privileged privilege. You need time and money to indulge in it. I had all the freedom in the world to play around, to experiment, etc. As a student it was simply fantastic. I was really able to focus on joy and creativity. Life, however, became more complex and responsibilities gather over time. Making money with art is difficult, and all the more so when you have a family to feed. Time then becomes very precious. I would say that 70% of my current time is spent networking. Finding the right balance is difficult, not only for me but also for all artists.

OR: Networking in terms of finding buyers, or also being part of a discourse, an international collective? Do you still work in isolation, or is exchange—now that you are in Berlin—part of your practice?

OK: Working between Berlin and Tel Aviv, which means following up with past and with potential future art buyers, inviting them to my studio in Tel Aviv and Berlin, and to different art exhibitions I take part in, and also inviting curators for studio visits. Taking part in art fairs where I sell my work and going to art fairs as a visitor to meet new people and make new connections and see what is new in general. I am also working on founding a residency program for Israeli artists in Berlin, which is a lot of work, especially with trying to find funding for something like this.

OR: Does this situation influence your work? If yes, is it a positive or negative influence?

OK: Both. For instance, I was in a very good “residence program” at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien here in Berlin. I didn’t have to worry about money for a year and a half. That is a gift. I had a massive studio and five assistants who helped with everything, whether it was



Olaf Kühnemann, *Sparkler*, 2011: Oil on Canvas, 100x140 cm. Photograph by Oswaldo Budet © Olaf Kühnemann.

documentation, archiving, creating catalogues, etc... I had no financial worries. Someone gave me the scholarship and bought time for me. When I left the program, however, creativity became more difficult. Now, I don't have any assistants, my studio is smaller, and I have less time. I sometimes cooperate with galleries, dealers, and curators. I have become increasingly less dependent on galleries in recent years; I make sure that I have direct contact with purchasers and collectors. But it distracts from my work in the studio. I have also tried to be both independent and cooperate with galleries.

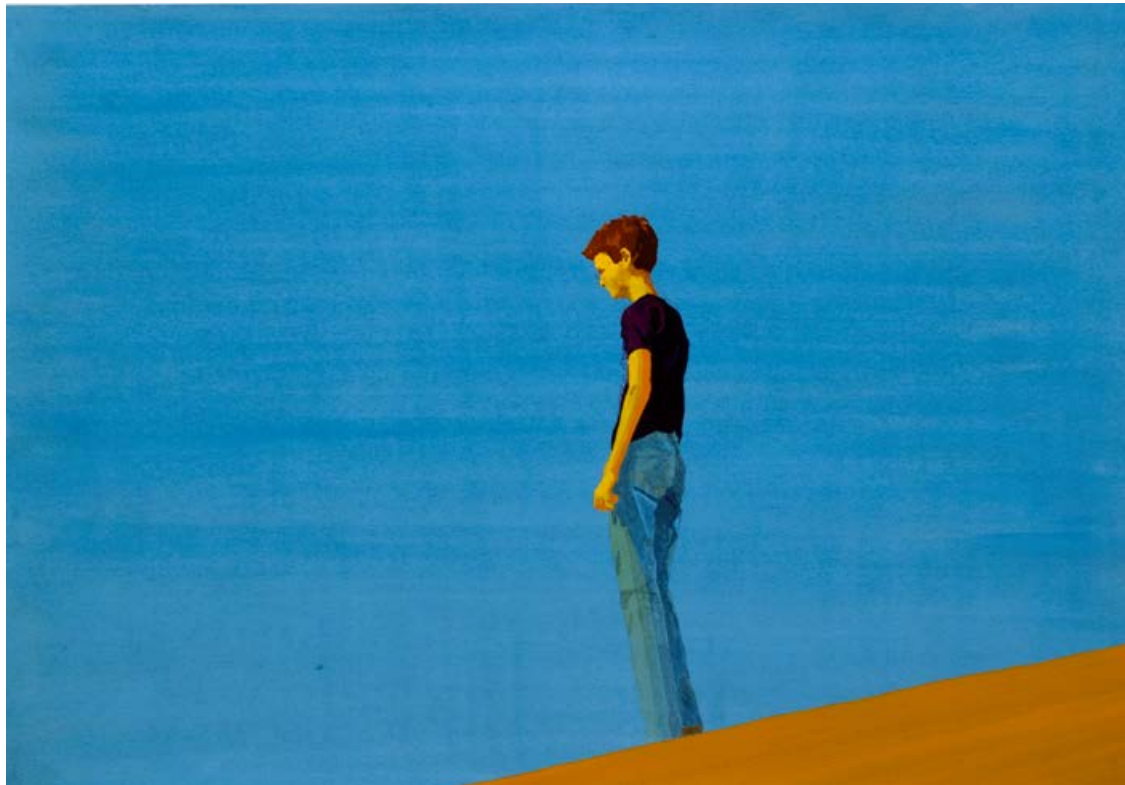
OR: You are part of the art world system. Even though the art world may often criticise economic and political circumstances, it is dependent on precisely these circumstances in order to exist. How do you deal with these contradictions?

OK: For me, it has to do with human qualities, not art itself. How you deal with it. Art is really only interesting because of the people, the relationships. Artists have problems if they are shy, or don't want to get involved in networking, or their time is consumed by these things. It took me a long time to understand that. I found it really hard work. Art also means people.

Meeting people and getting to know them. I don't go to art fairs to look at art, but to meet people—it's all about discourse, discussion, history, context, etc. You have to learn to play with the other children. Not to think about the future or the past, but simply to play. Art dealers only want to play with you, too. They come to my studio, listen to my story, look at my paintings, etc. I see the whole thing as a playground. But there again, what does "have to" mean here? There are artists for whom that means nothing, who reject the whole art politics thing, who prefer to be on their own. The consequence of that is that nobody notices them. At the end of the day, no one has to play if they don't want to.

OR: You say that Art is "only" interesting because of the people and the relationships. What do you mean by that? Would you be doing art if it wasn't because of the people?

OK: What I mean by art is only interesting because of the people and relationships is: interesting in the psychological sense, meaning that it is a social tool for engagement and discussion. Otherwise, if you don't have an audience and are not taking part in a discourse, then it's a limited narcissistic experience in the studio.



Olaf Kuehnemann, *Hilmar on Dune*, 2007: Gouache on paper, 35x50 cm. Photo: Ilit Azoulay © Olaf Kuehnemann.

OR: It's interesting that meeting people, it's all about discourse, discussion, history, context, etc. What do you think about how this informal discussion influences the broad organism of the art world?

OK: This is a very general broad question so hard to answer; I guess that if you are meeting many people and taking an active role within the discourse and playing the game, by nature it has influence and is interesting.

OR: You mentioned that there are artists who reject "the politics of the art world." You don't think that here exactly art is cutting itself off from the "world"?

OK: What I mean by this is that if an artist is working mainly in isolation, there is a price they pay for this isolation, the price of not being part of a discourse. There are very good and interesting artists who do work in relative isolation but have other people or dealers or galleries to do the networking for them, where things aren't mixed so much, but this is quite rare; the way the market works today is that most of the time you always have to be doing both.

OR: Who or what is influencing the politics of the art world?

OK: Many things and people are influencing the politics of the art world: globalisation, very powerful collectors, very powerful artists, curators, dealers, strong galleries, art fairs, museum directors, biennials, journalists, influential art media outlets, etc.

OR: Could it be that that playing the game makes your work less authentic?

OK: When I'm alone in the studio, I try not to submit to the art market or its offers. I try to be authentic. At the same time, however, I try to sell this "realness" in the world of art. For instance, I once exhibited a small installation at a gallery. When I had it back in my studio again and a dealer came to visit me, he was totally smitten. He said I should do a series, and it was a great success in Israel. At that moment, it was like somehow tapping into honest, playful creativity. At the time, I thought I was maybe compromising, but I realised at the same time that it was a responsible thing to do. Responsible because, as I said earlier, I have a family. That is reality, and life is no different.



Olaf Kuehnemann, *Hornby Island, Hertzelya Pituach Living Room*, 2009: Oil on Wood. Solo Exhibition, (Schichten/Layers, Exhibition view at Alexander Baumgarte Galerie – Bielefeld Germany). Photo: Olaf Kuhnemann © Olaf Kuehnemann.



Olaf Kuehnemann, *Paintings*, 2015: A4 and some things, (Exhibition view at Künstlerhaus Bethanien - Berlin). Photo: Boaz Arad © Olaf Kuehnemann.

OR: What does your work now relate to? What are your current influences? (to explain what authentic means, because it is a woolly word)

OK: At this point in time, my work relates to issues like free association and identity. My current influences are very varied and from different sources, for example, music, bicycles, other painting, nature, themes like day and night, sun and moon.

OR: What is gained if you are noticed (beyond being able to pay the rent, of course)?

OK: This is a very general question—gained in which way? This is very personal and subjective for each person; what I may feel as gaining, another person may feel as losing, so it's hard to answer. For me, very subjectively, is that if I am noticed as an artist and as a person it gives a sense of meaning and purpose, it is also nice for the ego.

Notes

I http://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/migration-wir-sind-ganz-und-gar-hier.1153.de.html?dram:article_id=272221

Olaf Kühnemann was born in 1972 to German parents. Until the age of four, he was raised in Basel. Following the divorce of his parents and the second marriage of his mother he moved 1977 to Montreal, Canada and 1980 to Herzliya, Israel. His first art teacher is the sculptor Zvi Lachman. At the age of 18, he moved to New York. Upon his arrival he first studied privately with the painter David Paulson, after which he continued to the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture (1990-1992), under the guidance of Rosemarie, Ruth Miller and Bruce Gagnier, among others. Upon graduating from New York Studio School, Kühnemann started his master's degree at the Parsons School of Design (1992-1994), where he completed his MFA under the guidance of Glen Goldberg, Bruce Gagnier and Esteban Vicente, among others. He is the winner of the Isracard and Tel Aviv museum of Art prize of 2008, and was included in the juror's pick of the 2014 Thames & Hudson publishing's book, „100 Painters of Tomorrow“. Kühnemann lives and works between Berlin and Tel Aviv, is married to Tal Alon, founder and Editor of Spitz Magazin, the first Hebrew magazine

in Berlin and Germany since the holocaust, and is a father of two sons.

Oliver Rico, born 1980 in Zurich, studied sociology and law in Zurich and Lucerne, after which he completed a Master's degree in communication and organisation sociology in Lucerne. He was a visiting lecturer at the Department of Design/Cast/Audio-Visual Media at Zurich University of the Arts during the 2011/12 semester. In 2017/18 he gained the CAS Curating qualification, again at Zurich University of the Arts. He has worked in Switzerland and Spain as a recording manager and script consultant for short films. Other posts include work as a producer and dramatic advisor for the Actaeon Production Theatre Group and the theatrical association Hengst & Hitzkopf.

From an Imaginary Interview with Gregory Sholette

Yan SU

This semi-fictionalised interview is drawn from Gregory Sholette's detailed written response to my interview inquiry sent to him. Due to scheduling restrictions, a real-time one-on-one interview was not possible. The questions in the following text are mostly retrospectively inspired by his informative response (with my edits and his consent), which includes references to some of his published works.

Yan SU (YS): Regarding today's art world and educational system, what are your thoughts on a "territorial" structure of "centre/periphery" in comparison with your "astronomical" structure of dark/light matters? Does occupying one space preclude occupying the other?

Gregory Sholette (GS): I think it is important to clarify a couple of questions about my concepts that you might have misunderstood because my dark matter thesis does *not* propose a simple opposition between centre and periphery.

In brief, artistic dark matter refers to the marginalised and systematically underdeveloped aggregate of creative productivity that nonetheless reproduces the material and symbolic economy of high art. Think of the way the majority of art school graduates will, ten years or less after graduating, find themselves working as exhibition installers or art fabricators, rather than living off the sales of their own art. That is, if they are still making art at all, since the majority will have ceased painting, sculpting, performing, and so forth. Or similarly, consider the countless artistic collectives and interventionist art practitioners who, over many decades, have added essential energy and ideas to the broader art world discourse and practice. And yet they have done so from the margins of high culture, while only a few of these ever gain recognition within the white citadels of that same world. Instead, most participants in high culture—the sphere of biennials, art fairs, auction houses, top-tier art galleries, and major museums—make up a necessarily redundant economy of artistic labour. Think of this as a residual agency

that operates out of sight and from below, somewhere within a surplus archive of artistic hopes, possibilities, failures, and alternative practices. Think of this as the dark matter of the art world.

One of the key questions raised in my book *Dark Matter*,¹ therefore, is not only what this glut of artistic creativity consists of—after all, artists have regrettably constituted an unregulated, overeducated, and spectacularly over-productive labour force for decades—but instead what function does this seeming surplus play in the production of art world values estimated by some in the billions of dollars in sales. Is it a lightless backdrop to starry careers, a shadowy other realm over which the bright and articulate signal of success and value is superimposed? Or is there much deeper complicity between noise and signal? After all, any complex system in which the majority of practitioners remain undeveloped yet actively engaged in its reproduction must extract some hidden benefit from this so-called excess fecundity? What if, instead of forming a dark periphery, this missing mass suffused the normative art world's institutions and discourse all the way down, sort of like striations in marble or the metal rebar that reinforces cast concrete?

In other words, my idea of artistic dark matter involves the entwining of both institutional and visible high cultural people and practices, as well as its necessary if unrecognised, though always in plain sight, shadow archive of redundant, surplus practitioners, ideas, projects, etc.

YS: What is the power dynamic between the "dark" and "light" matters in the contemporary art world for you?

GS: The argument I make in my book, as well as in my essays, is a proposition stating that this once marginal 'dark matter' force is getting brighter.

Thanks to recent technological, ideological, and economic changes concurrent with neoliberal globalisation, a host of previously disconnected, informal, and

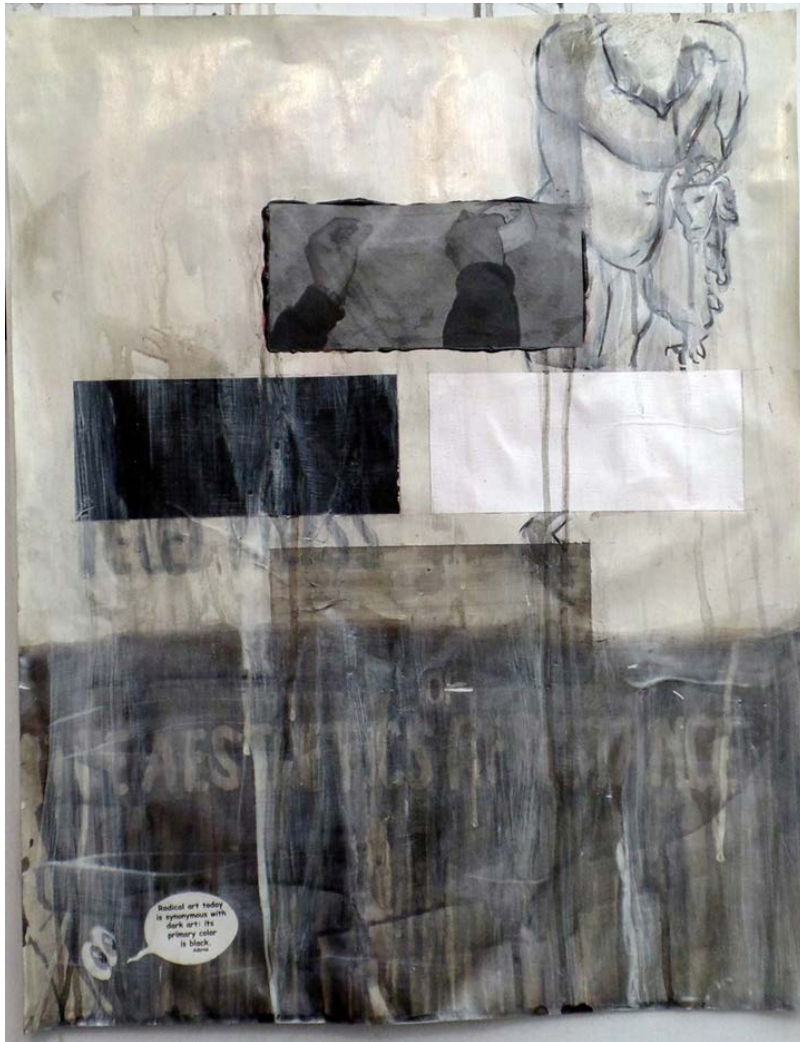


Gregory Sholette, *Imaginary Archive*, Germany. White Box gallery at Zeppelin University, Friedrichshafen, 2015.

Imaginary Archive is a 'traveling, mixed media participatory project'. From 2010 to 2015, Gregory Sholette invited participants from six countries and others from around the globe to produce 'a collection of unknown, under-represented, dreaded and/or hoped-for "historical" materials' that might 'record a past whose future never arrived'. (For more information: http://www.gregorysholette.com/?page_id=2910)

non-market producers have begun to materialise, cohere, and sometimes even develop into thicker networks bristling with a self-conscious desire for autonomy. In other words, dark matter is getting brighter. And with this brightening emerges a very different type of creative productivity than that sanctioned by high culture. An ever more accessible technology for manufacturing, documenting, distributing, as well as pilfering, sharing, and fictionalizing information is ending the historical isolation of this shadowy

sphere and in the process provoking fundamental challenges not only to orthodox notions of art, but also to established theories of business management, and traditional concepts of social agency. One reason for this turmoil is that dark matter partakes of heterodox methods of organising and collectivisation involving cooperative networks, non-market systems of gift exchange, and forms of collective production that are inherently unsettling to mainstream notions of aesthetic privilege, hierarchical authority, and individual



Darker by Gregory Sholette, Station Independent Gallery, 2017

With a nod to Leonard Cohen's final song, 'You Want It Darker,' as well as to the sorrowful state of democracy in the US and the world, Sholette's third solo exhibition at Station Independent Projects presented a series of ink, pencil and acrylic wash drawings portraying scenes of recent activist art and direct political resistance. (For more information: http://www.gregorysholette.com/?page_id=3158)

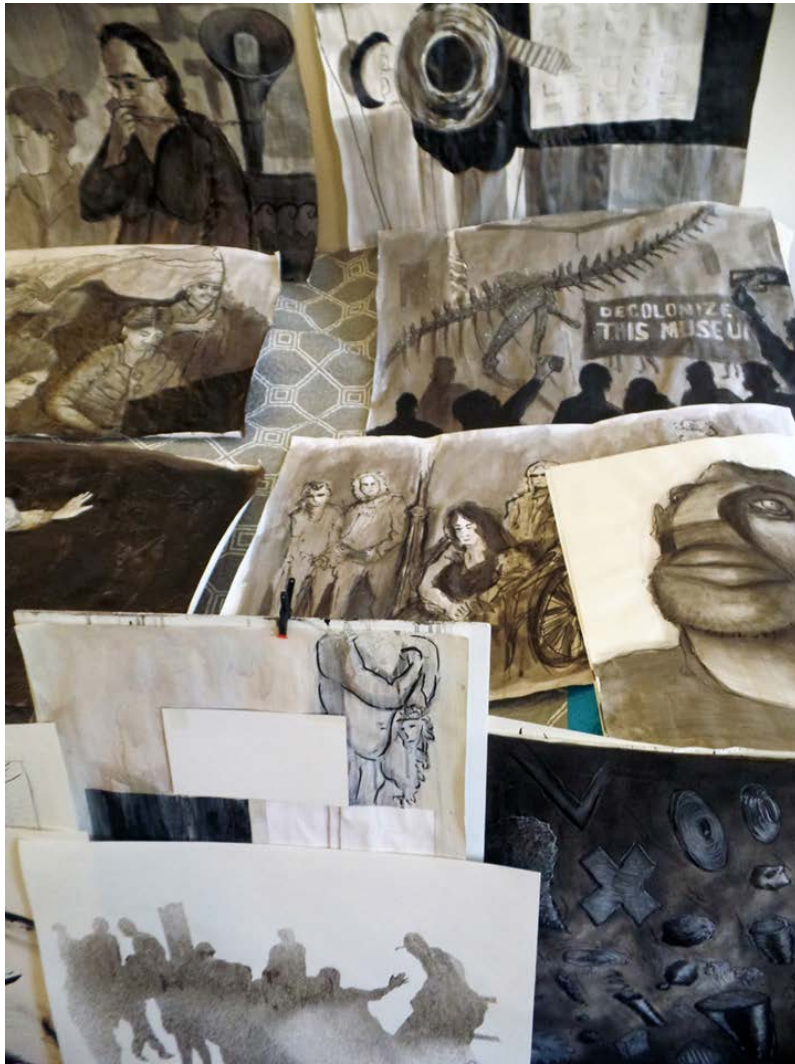
success. Which is to say what I am calling dark matter often partakes of what Georges Bataille described as a "principle of loss," a pathological economy of expenditure without precise utility. In many instances, this system of gift-giving serves to level-off differences of power, permitting participation by individuals who would otherwise be marginalised by experts or insiders.

YS: Almost ten years have passed since you published your book *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*. Do you see an evolution in your thesis regarding 'dark matter'? Has it withstood the test of time?

GS: 2010 was the actual publication date of the book, but 2008 was the year I finished writing the book, just

as the US and then the whole world economy was coming undone. Preceding the book, I wrote two essays, namely "Heart of Darkness" (2000) and "Dark Matter" (2002). They addressed the same concept and were published as chapters in books.

Much has happened since I first developed the thesis in 2000 and then focused my counter-art historical argument into the 2010 book *Dark Matter* after publishing several essays on this topic. I completed the book just as the financial crisis took down most of the world's capitalist economies, but not yet in time to see the explosion of anger erupt on the streets and plazas and parks of so many cities. The Occupy Movement started with the Puerta del Sol in Madrid in 2011, then caught fire across the Middle East, and then lit-up Wall



Darker by Gregory Sholette, Station Independent Gallery, 2017

Street’s Zuccotti Park in my native New York City, and so on. But those occupying rebellions by the 99% *marginalities* and the suddenly jobless and futureless creative class *cognitariats* have also now sadly entered the surplus archive of a dark matter’s *history from below*.

Either by coincidence or simply as a result of the same historical urgency that compelled me to write *Dark Matter* in the first place, an astonishing ripple of protests sped across Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. Those socially disregarded organised these protests by using social media, which soon inspired the movement known as Occupy Wall Street (OWS). But like similar protests in Spain and Greece, this was made up of a very different class of people: young ‘creatives’ who in the aftermath of the 2008-2009 financial meltdown realised they had become economically redundant. As these protests and encampments propagated, they dramatically re-imagined political agency

in what was now a mostly privatised public sphere. They also animated ideas and discourses that thirty years of highly deregulated capitalism had sought to erase. Labour suddenly returned as a political issue. With the spread of the “We are the 99%” meme, it was often artists, especially those side-lined by the established art world, who emerged as key organisers of OWS chapters focused on working conditions including, in New York, the Art and Labor Working Group, Occupy Museums, and Strike Debt.

YS: If not in a scientific way, “dark” might evoke a somewhat sinister tone. However, I extract mostly positive traits from your description of dark matter in the art world. Is that your intention?

GS: I think this is very important to stress, not all of what I call “dark matter” is positive, progressive or pro-democratic in outlook. In fact, as this so-called

“dark matter brightens,” it is reasonable to expect more and more far-Right formations to emerge.

I noted this point as far back as 2000, and then amplified in my 2010 book *Dark Matter*. For instance, in Chapter Four of the book, I discuss the US Militia Movement, which is a nationalist and often racist para-military endeavour by citizens near the border with Mexico and raises the question of Nietzschean *ressentiment*.

I just finished a new introduction to a Spanish edition of the book. I addressed this concern by focusing on my experience in Kiev, Ukraine, during the 2014 Euro-maidan occupation.

The Ukrainian edition of Imaginary Archive’s participants belonged by and large to the small, liberal-Left intellectual sector. By one artist’s estimate, it consists of between seventy and a hundred people. Passionate though disorganised, seriously outnumbered, their brief presence on Maidan was easily foiled by men wielding clubs. Not surprisingly, many artists turned to the cultural sphere to express their resistance. But culture is hardly the province of progressives.

What is striking about the Ukrainian revolution is the degree to which a previously shadowy sphere of ideological interests rapidly cohered through acts of self-representation thanks to a combination of populist activism, networking technology, and a significantly weakened central state.

Negt and Kluge expressed in their book that, “Throughout history, living labour has, along with the surplus value extracted from it, carried on its own production—within fantasy.”² If we sympathise with their “counter-publics” thesis, then the surprised fantasies Euromaidan released were frequently laden with anachronistic and mythopoetic imagery often of a reactionary type.

Of course, the political economy of this imaginary production is never neat and orderly but is instead permeated with hopes as well as resentments. On Maidan, behind improvised plywood shields, men bore pitchforks and makeshift wooden maces. At one point, protestors constructed a Molotov cocktail-launching contraption that resembled a medieval catapult. On another day, *babushka flash mobs* sang quaint Ukrainian folk songs. Illuminated by pyres of flaming tyres, this brightening slew of unrestrained fantasies, some

at least partially real, though all decidedly heroic, flared rapidly into visibility. Maidan’s *imaginary archive* was unleashed; Ukrainian dark matter was no longer dark. Everywhere one turns, similar acts of virtually militant self-representation are on the rise. On the Left. On the Right. And among an infinite number of spaces between.

YS: Let’s move onto the global situation over the past few years. What happened to “dark matter” during these years? I refer to Adam Curtis’s 2016 documentary *HyperNormalisation*—a word borrowed from a Russian historian to describe a feeling of being trapped in the sense of “total fakeness as normal” due to a lacking “alternative vision.”³ You mentioned earlier that “dark matter is getting brighter.” Both of these ideas, to me, seem to relate to differently imagined realities. But yours suggests a dynamic progression, which is somewhat counter to Curtis’s accepting a static normal.

GS: Regarding the uncanny political and cultural actualities of 2018, two years after Brexit and Trump, there are a couple of questions in my mind. Where does this new reality leave dark matter including us barricade builders, museum boycotters, and barricade busters? Where does it leave those of us who construct mock-institutional identities to slip between the interstitial spaces of an omnivorous culture industry, but also those of us attempting to paradoxically support social practice art while preventing it from becoming just another academic field?

Perhaps by refusing to construct our own absolutist mythologies, by keeping all notions of identity in play, we produce a kind of alternative “usership,” to deploy a smart, handy term devised by theorist Stephen Wright. He used the word to describe art that escapes its ontological conditions to seep out unrecognised into the everyday world.⁴

Still, there are always two distinct ways of interpreting the *imaginary archive*: with solemnity or without.

In one way, some people imagine their collective bodies grounded in a solidly reconstructed and glorious past. The mix of nationalist nostalgia and xenophobia-fuelled *ressentiment* is on the rise. We see it with the racist, misanthropic rallies and websites of the so-called alt-Right, but also amongst the anti-immigrant, populist Right-wing supporters of Donald Trump in the US, and with the pro-Brexit separatists in the UK.

It is a dangerous sentiment for outmoded notions of manhood and authority found in Golden Dawn in Greece, Five Star in Italy, Svoboda in Ukraine, Law and Justice in Poland, Viktor Orban's Fidesz party in Hungary, the PSL in Brazil, and the government of President Ivan Duque in Colombia, among other countries, where the promise of neoliberal globalisation has failed much of the population, yet where a Left alternative seems unachievable, or lacks cohesion.

But then there is the other way of imagining collective identity as practised by those who openly and sometimes gleefully explore the ambivalence of identities whether past, present or future, such as Gulf Labor Coalition and Global Ultra Luxury Faction battling the mega-museum expansion of the Guggenheim into the human labour rights disaster zone known as the kingdom of Abu Dhabi, or the DIY superheroes from Spain known as The Reflectors (Los Reflectantes), or Russia's balaclava-shrouded Pussy Riot, or the Aaron Burr Society in the United States, whose reinterpretation of America's historic anti-tax Whiskey Rebellion stands opposite the effectively theological fundamentalism of the Tea Party Patriots.

May I suggest that you and your readers not miss the next special issue of *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism* in which the editors and I patched together over thirty reports from around the world discussing the state of art and politics since the 2016 elections in US and UK in particular. Issue #12 should be online sometime in January 2019: <http://field-journal.com/>.

YS: In the conclusion of your recent writing concerning the question of whether “a Turing test for activist art in a bare art world” is needed, you answer your question by stating: “There is no wall or barrier concealing anyone’s identity. Our test participants are successful machines, just like their evaluator, and activism as a rehearsal of the future has become activism as a rehearsal of the present, in all its preternatural materiality.” Would you describe the current “bare art world” as somewhere that people, including those in the “dark matter,” perform diversely fragmented roles? Would that weaken the vitality of “dark matter”?



Peter Weiss's book *The Aesthetics of Resistance (Volume 1)* presented during Gregory Sholette's Darker exhibition, 2017

* The book was mentioned in the interview



We Are The 1%, Photomontage, by Noel Douglas

'This image is an imagined demonstration of the 1% political puppets, our political leaders.' Noel Douglas (<http://www.noeldouglas.net>)

Activist designer Noel Douglas designed a book titled *It's The Political Economy, Stupid* (Pluto Press, 2013), which was edited by Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler.

GS: We have arrived at a moment of great possibility and equally great risk. There are remarkable, everyday acts of resistance in public squares and pro-human rights interventions into major museums, but there is also a foul populist uprush of unbridled resentment towards immigrants, women, transgendered individuals, and people of colour, especially those demanding their rights such as Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement. The rapid illumination of a missing mass simultaneously threatens and fascinates the world of politics, mass media, but also that of contemporary art, now increasingly subsumed within the sphere of affective capitalism, leaving high culture in a naked condition that I call "Bare Art," following and tweaking Giorgio Agamben's phrase "Bare Life."

Meanwhile, the socially conscious intellectual never surrenders questioning the substrate of his or her discipline, no matter how squalid its conditions, and never loses hope. Dark Matter is one name for this par-

adox. The primary thesis of my book is not why certain art practices, groups, and individuals have failed to register within the event horizon of the mainstream art world, but what the value-adding role this missing socialised mass provides to the narratives, institutions, and political economy of contemporary art.

The task that stands before the forces of progressive culture, therefore, is not one of eliminating ambiguity and ellipsis from the historical imagination as we see with the populist Right. What the task calls for now is a grammar of cultural dissent not willing to turn innocently away from the chaotic and delirious state of contemporary social realities, or the contradictions of dark matter within a world of bare art. It needs a critical analysis that recognises this moment, this perilous moment, as ultimately historical in nature, and therefore also as a time and conflict that will one day be displaced, as all such moments are.

One significant weapon in this battle is the difficult and continuous collective development of the dark matter archive from below, that redundant agency made up of surplus memories, marginalised hopes, as well as defeats, passed on to us by the dead, and that we must now be certain to pass on to future generations.

YS: In your role as a professor in the Social Practice Queens program at Queens College, how do you explain to your students about their future “career”? How might they be able to make a living as socially engaged artists?

GS: The first thing I discuss with my graduate students is the economy of the art world, and how difficult their situation is and will continue to be, especially with a degree in art, which is not a readily employable accreditation. I very much wish you had taken time to read my book *Dark Matter* because these considerations are a central thread within the text. A recent essay from my 2017 book *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*⁵ also addresses issues of student and artistic debt.

Notes

1 Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

2 Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, translated by P. Labanyi, J. O. Daniel, and A. Oksiloff and contains a forward by Miriam Hansen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 32.

3 “The antidote to civilisational collapse: An interview with the documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis”, *Open Future*, *The Economist*, Dec. 6, 2018, accessed Dec. 29, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/12/06/the-antidote-to-civilisational-collapse>.

4 Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2014).

5 Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

Gregory Sholette: In his wide-ranging art, activist, teaching and writing practice, Gregory Sholette (American, b. 1956; lives in New York) develops a self-described 'viable, democratic, counter-narrative that, bit-by-bit, gains descriptive power within the larger public discourse.' He is a founding member of Political Art Documentation/Distribution

(PAD/D: 1980-1988, NYC); of REPOhistory collective (1989-2000); and Gulf Labor, an artists' group advocating for migrant workers' rights constructing Western branded art museums in Abu Dhabi (2010-ongoing). His recent art installations include Imaginary Archive at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania and the White Box at Zeppelin University, Germany. His collaborative performance Precarious Workers Pageant premiered in Venice on August 7, 2015.

While his individual art explores issues of artistic labour and political resistance via drawing, sculpture and mixed media, Sholette's critical writing documents and reflects upon decades of activist art, much of which might otherwise remain invisible. He has contributed to such journals as *Eflux*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Texte zur Kunst*, *October*, *CAA Art Journal* and *Manifesta Journal* among other publications. He is editor or author of seven published volumes including most recently *Art as Social Action* (edited with Chloë Bass: Skyhorse Publishers, May 2018); *Delirium & Resistance: Art Activism & the Crisis of Capitalism* (2017) and *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in an Age of Enterprise Culture* (2011, both Pluto Press).

Sholette is a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program in Critical Theory. He is an Associate of the Art, Design and the Public Domain program at the Graduate School of Design Harvard University, served as a Curriculum Committee member of Home WorkSpace Beirut education program. He is also an Associate Professor in the Queens College Art Department, City University of New York where he helped establish the new MFA Concentration SPQ (Social Practice Queens).

Yan SU holds an MFA in Socially Engaged Art from Geneva University of Art and Design (2016-2018). Besides studio practices, he was involved in several social art projects, in which he played multiple roles. After obtaining an MA and BA in Digital Media from Communication University in China (2001-2007), Yan embarked on an online communication career at an international organisation. He enrolled on the MAS Curating programme in Zurich University of the Arts in 2018.

“Anxiety now prevails”

A Conversation with Dmitry Vilensky

Anastasia Chaguidouline

In the evening of 2 November 2018, Dmitry Vilensky, a founding member of the collective **Chto Delat** (“What is to be done”) and I met in Zurich. We talked about Russia, anxiety, the failure of capitalism, and the territoriality of the New Left.

Anastasia Chaguidouline: What was your practice before founding Chto Delat?

Dmitry Vilensky: I gained quite meaningful experience in curatorial and self-organisational practices. I was running different self-organised spaces in Saint Petersburg and worked as a curator in Germany. The work was mainly focused on art practices rooted in photography.

Another important endeavour before Chto Delat was the collaboration between Olga Tsaplya Egorova and myself, another founding member of Chto Delat. We started producing art projects, publications, newspapers—that became later the Chto Delat newspaper.

AC: How did the collective Chto Delat and the practice of merging art, political theory, and activism emerge? Was this practice new to the Russian art scene?

DV: Chto Delat developed out of a political action. We, the participants, found ourselves in a very difficult political situation in 2003. The public action was called *We Are Leaving* and took place on the occasion of the 300-year anniversary of the city of St. Petersburg. This action was a culmination of a general discontent with local cultural politics, shared between a vast range of cultural workers. In addition, there was a very important new aspect that is difficult to grasp nowadays. There was a new understanding of Left politics and an appearance of a new political language, not only in Russia, but internationally. One can think, for instance, about the Zapatista movement. In the West, this happened somewhat earlier than in Russia, due to the post-Soviet ‘90s. One can see proper documentation of this event in our first issue of the newspaper called “What is to be done” published shortly after.

I don’t think that there were really groups merging political activism and art before 2000 in Russia, at least not in a “Western sense.” One might mention the Moscow actionists, yet their practice belonged more to the field of actionism than activism. They did great work and linked it to political theory—people like Anatoly Osmolovsky, Alexander Brenner, Radek group, and some others. Also some neo-anarchist groups were active even after Perestroika; however, they did not necessarily use the medium of art. What we have done is quite different from the people I mention above. We were not really active in the form of street interventions; however, between 2004 and 2007 we realised a few actions like *Stop the Machine* (2004), *Kronstadt Forever* (2005), and *In Praise of Dialectics* (2006).



AC: How does the current political climate in Russia influence your practice?

DV: The opportunities for exhibiting and funding are scarce. However, they always have been scarce. Therefore, it is important to learn how to use them well. The state funding of critical contemporary art is close to 0%. Especially for us or other leftist artists who are considered dissident. There is no systematic funding for the established arts, unlike in the West. However, for specific projects, one might get support from foundations. There are several biennales happening, for example, in Moscow and in Ural, and new contemporary art centres are opening their doors. It is interesting to note that while Moscow has seen many important art centres open its doors, including Garage and Elektrozavod, paradoxically St. Petersburg lacks resources and does not have any important contemporary art institutions. There are some galleries, but very little in number. Generally speaking, the contemporary art scene in St. Petersburg is a very apolitical one and stays outside of social life.

After 2012, the opportunities decreased even further for contemporary Russian artists. Paradoxically enough, these repressive times brought up new opportunities for Chto Delat. We could open a Rosa's House of Culture and establish our art school, School of Engaged Art thanks to the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

AC: The name of your collective, Chto Delat, is a very prominent one, as it coincides with the title of a pamphlet by Lenin that was published in 1902. What importance does this name have for you?

DV: I think we were very lucky with the choice of our name. For us, it has more references to the 1863 novel by Nikolai Chernyshevsky and plays a bigger role in terms of meaning than Lenin's pamphlet.

However, the concrete inspiration for the name appeared around the year 2001, out of my exposure to or exchange with the Western, namely German, context. I remember seeing a series on the TV channel Arte with the title *Was Tun?* (What Is to Be



Done? in German). Back then, these series really struck me, as they showed such a panorama of new political activity, such as the Zapatista movement or the new Italian Left.

So, when we were thinking about the name for our own collective, the idea was to reclaim that title from the Russian perspective. The name felt right and remained. This gesture of positioning ourselves as politically left in Russia at that time was still very scandalous, as the whole intellectual and cultural world was generally right-wing liberal. I would not say conservative, because there was much less conservatism back then than there is nowadays in Russia. However, liberalism in Russia clearly differs from the West. In Russia, you have clearly more of a right-wing liberalism. That being said, our gesture back then was clearly a gesture of dissidence.

AC: How has the constellation of your workgroup / collective changed or remained?

DV: The constellation changed, but not very much. Some members left and others came. However, Chto Delat is not an open collective. Our core group is permanent. I can't say that the core group is closed by protocol; nevertheless, we have strong generational and personal relations. The last person that joined the group was the choreographer Nina Gasteva in 2010. Since then, some members have left. I think we will either stay in this constellation in the future or disperse.

On the other hand, we have active and lively inter-generational temporal collaborations. Recently, we have worked with other prominent artists such as Anton Kats and Babi Badalov. Our pedagogical practice is closely tied to our artistic methodology. Indeed, the pedagogical practice became more and more important with, for instance, the founding of the School for Engaged Art. Art education is traditionally inter-generational, if one looks at the relationship between mentor and student. I think that the exchange between two different generational viewpoints can lead to completely new ways of creating and working. This can be very fruitful and beneficial for both sides involved.

We are positioning ourselves as a national and local St. Petersburg collective. For us, it is very important that the working language is Russian. The language and the territoriality are crucial for us as a collective. Chto Delat was formed in St. Petersburg. There was a small branch of the collective in Moscow, and some members live outside of the territory of St. Petersburg today, yet it still remains a St. Petersburg collective, through its histories and its main genealogy.

AC: How would you describe St. Petersburg's genealogy?

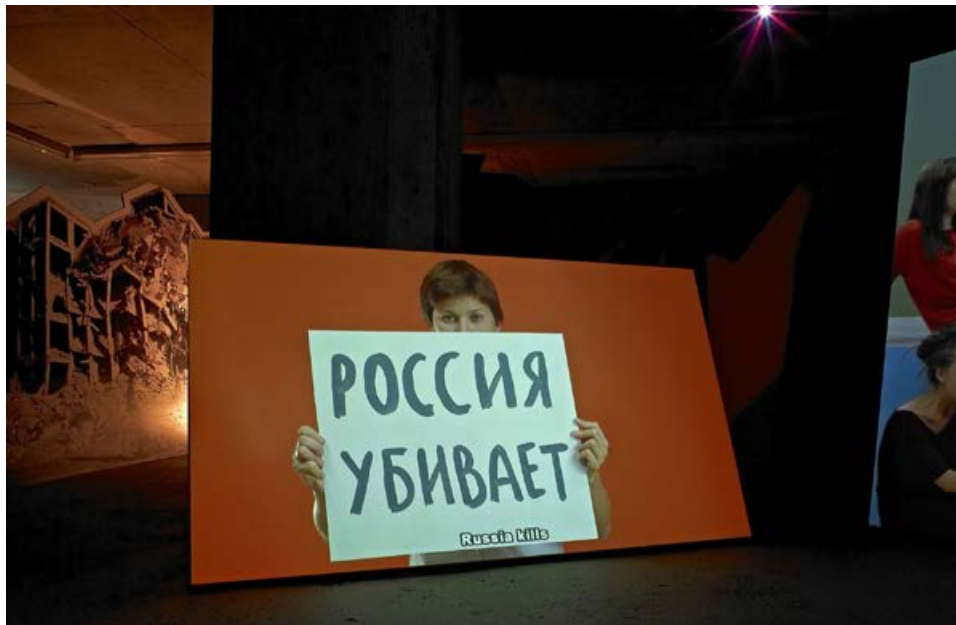
DV: It is difficult to succeed in formulating what the St. Petersburg context really is. Many have tried describing it, everyone feels it, but when one starts generalising it, the result usually turns out to be bad.

On the one hand, the context is a very old one, starting with the era of great Russian literature, with Pushkin, Dostoyevsky. All these great writers could not fully grasp the city or its context, because after all, the city is in a way artificial. It appeared as a kind of mirage, as the city was copied from the West and then even became a double or mirrored mirage, when it lost its status as a capital. Andrey Bely once wrote in his most famous conceptual novel *Petersburg* at the beginning of 20th century: "If St. Petersburg will not be the capital, St. Petersburg will not be!" So, before the October Revolution, the important identity feature of the city was its hold on political power and governance. Later, the city was deprived of its power, its glory, and its money.

AC: Do the individual members of Chto Delat all position themselves as politically left?

DV: Yes, however, without being overly dogmatic—left in a broader sense of the term. At the beginning, we had many discussions, "Auseinandersetzungen," that were reminiscent of the arguments between, for instance, the Bolsheviks and Anarchists.

There are a lot of different positions within the Left, but there is a certain shared vision or understanding. The main point of this shared understanding stands in sharp contrast with the liberals. It is a strong feeling of disappointment in capitalism and human rights rhetoric. It is a serious understanding that capitalism is not the answer to the question, but instead the problem and maybe the central problem of society and democracy. And that most importantly, its hegemony is total, and it doesn't allow for any doubt.





AC: Speaking about ideology and the future, do you believe that socialism could be an answer for Russia and/or maybe the world?

DV: At the moment, it is very difficult to say anything. The prevailing feeling is disappointment and depression. I have to say that we as a group are still carried by the optimism of the early 2000s. There was a social burst and various social movements emerged at that time. There wasn't this permanent feeling of anxiety. Anxiety now prevails, it dominates. It has reached a stage of disease. Additionally, this anxiety is fed every day, by the media, by the politics, by your neighbour. On a daily basis, you hear about yet another disaster, and you can't do anything.

AC: How did the feeling in the '90s differ from what is experienced now?

DV: Actually, we lived through the '90s quite happily, as I recall. When the restrictive Soviet Union crashed, it was a shock. However, freedom came to Russia and a certain openness towards the world outside, and a lot of possibilities appeared. Of course, there were a lot of people who had problems, whose lives crashed completely, and many families lived at the level of hunger. Actually, many people died or were not born those days. It was a tough moment, but I wouldn't agree with the people that say that the '90s were a social disaster. It is difficult to generalise, but this is my personal experience. And I think ultimately there was this, in a way, hopeful feeling of: "Now, we will go through this suffering and at the end better times await!"

Of course, there were tragic biographies; someone who previously was an engineer would become a cleaner... Yet these unexpected trajectories brought with them a lot of adventure, sometimes tragic, sometimes magical. There was a sense of shock and transformation. In those times, even when I think about the generation of my parents, people were thinking that this hard transformative journey would lead to a better place. Maybe I am idealising, but there was a will to survive.

Another problem of capitalism, in comparison to the times of communist Russia, is the problem of choice. Nowadays, there is an abundance of things to choose from,

which naturally leads to over-consumerism. No matter what you choose, you choose wrongly—you can only make the wrong choice and remain frustrated. You regret your choice, because someone has chosen something better than you. In the Soviet Union, there was no vicious circle of psychological frustration, because there was nothing to choose from. There was one party and one type of sausage. When there was only one TV channel, everything was easier.

AC: Did Chto Delat mostly work in St. Petersburg at the beginning of your collective practice? How fast did you enter the international realm?

DV: Exhibition-wise, in the first couple of years we realised a few large-scale projects in St. Petersburg. We also did some important stuff in Moscow in 2005 and 2006. At the same time, we had started grass-roots exchanges internationally along the activist networks, as a kind of micro-politics, but a very important practice. After this came a long period that was dominated by international practice. Then, we founded our school and the Rosa's House of Culture locally again, so our practice at the moment is very local, but we manage to keep our international presence as well.

We always tried to claim a certain notion of equality. We don't see ourselves as exporters of a certain knowledge to the West. In parallel, we are bringing a lot of materials and ideas from the West and translating them into local experiences. We started to speak about certain things which at that time in Russia were yet unspoken of. We saw ourselves as translators, not only in one direction, but in both.

Furthermore, the films that we are producing are very distinct. They are available online, and one can really see them as a digital archive. For us, it is important to show this narrative openly and clarify that we differ from common gallery artists in our standpoint on copyrights. We are paying a certain price for this standpoint, but I am sure that this type of distribution is the future—the development of new forms of commons and sharing. This standpoint on copyrights is our modest strive to adhere to the values that we are talking about.

AC: Is there a specific goal in your practice? How long do you think Chto Delat will operate as a collective?

DV: We have the possibility to make certain statements about the world, and we will continue to make them, as long as it remains interesting to us and to someone else. In my opinion, our practice is about insisting on certain values that not a lot of people would speak about.

I think, as a group we can operate as long as we are still interested in what we are doing and have a willingness to do something and argue/share with the younger generation. I feel that there will be an end, a limit of our practice, which will not come with the end of our physical lives, but some time before.

Additional Informations

In order of appearance

Olga Tsaplya Egorova (born 1968) is a Russian writer and director. She is a founding member of the collective Chto Delat.

Zapatista Army of National Liberation, founded in 1983, is a far-left political and militant group that controls large territories in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. They declared war against the Mexican state in 1994. Their name is inspired by Emiliano Zapata, the commander of the Liberation Army of the South during the Mexican Revolution.

Nikolai Chernyshevsky (born 1828) was a Russian materialist philosopher, journalist and literary critic. He was a revolutionary democrat and socialist and led the revolutionary democratic movement of the 1860's in Russia that is said to have influenced many thinkers, including Vladimir Lenin and Emma Goldman.

Nina Gasteva is a choreographer and teacher from Riga, Latvia. Since 2010, she is a permanent member of the collective Chto Delat.

Anatoly Osmolovsky (born 1969) is a Russian artist, editor and theorist.

Alexander Brenner

Radek group is a group of young artists, musicians and activists founded in Moscow in 1997 around the school of Anatoly Osmolovsky and Avdey Ter-Oganyan.

Anton Kats (born 1983 Kherson) is an artist, musician and dancer from Ukraine. He lives and works in Berlin where he lectures at Weissensee School of Art.

Babi Badalov (born 1959) is a poet and artist. He was born in Lerik, Republic of Azerbaijan and today lives and works in Paris.

Russian Civil War was a war that happened between 1917 and 1925, immediately after the October Revolution. The two largest groups in this multi-party conflict were the Red Army of the Bolsheviks led by Vladimir Lenin and the **White Army**. The White Army included interests in favour of monarchism, capitalism and alternative forms of democratic and non-democratic socialism.

Andrei Bely (born 1880) was a Russian novelist, theorist and literary critic, known for his novel *Petersburg*.

Dmitry Vilensky (born 1964) is a Russian artist, writer and activist. Photography was Dmitry's main medium between the mid-eighties and mid-nineties, in which he developed the practice of „*Photo-archeology*“. He later involves himself in multidisciplinary projects that include many diverse media, for instance, video, photography, graphic, text, installation and public intervention. He is a founding member of the platform **Chto Delat? / What is to be done?**, initiated in 2003. Chto Delat? is a collective of philosophers, writers, curators, artists, critics, among others that merge art, activism and political theory. Vilensky is also an editor of the Chto Delat? newspaper. In the recent years he is guest lecturing at various Universities of Art and Fine Arts Programs in the „former“ West, while also lecturing at the Chto Delat? School of Engaged Art.

Vilensky lives and works in St. Petersburg, Russia.

The collective **Chto Delat?** / What is to be done? was founded in early 2003 in St. Petersburg, Russia by a workgroup of artists, critics, philosophers and writers from St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Nizhny Novgorod with the goal of merging art, political theory, and activism. They strongly position themselves as internationalists, demanding the recognition of equality of all people; and feminists, positioned against all forms of gender inequality, homophobia and patriarchy.

The films and various other contents are available open source on their website, as the group is relying on the idea of shared open source knowledge production and distribution. The collective consists of a core group, temporary members and project participants for film and performance production.

Their practice consists of graphic work, writing, publishing work, own newspaper, public art, public interventions and sculptures, plays, performances, a school, visual art, activism and film among other.

Source: chtodelat.org

Anastasia Chaguidouline is an art mediator and writer, currently based in Basel, Switzerland. She currently works at various institutions including Museum Tinguely, Vitra Design Museum, Kunstmuseum Winterthur and Art Basel. At present, she writes prose and poetry, mainly in German and has previously worked as a translator. Her main focus lies in the intersection between art and literature and multilingual practices. In 2018 her texts were published in The Contemporary Condition series (Sternberg Press). She holds a BA in Fine Arts from the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague and an MA in Arts from Institut Kunst, Basel.

An Interview with Raqs Media Collective

Francesca Ceccherini, Noriko Yamakoshi

Francesca Ceccherini and Noriko Yamakoshi: First of all, we would like to ask you about the essence of your practice. What motivated this energy at the start and along the process up to now, when Raqs is twenty-six years old?

Raqs Media Collective: We wanted to give to ourselves an image that allowed us to rethink continuously who we are, not as a fixed idea or image, but as something mobile and in transformation. So, we came up with this specific name—Raqs—that suggested a form of “dancing” together, whirling, relaying an inner joy to one another. It was a way to give ourselves a philosophical principle. We didn’t write a document or a manifesto; we tried to figure out a way of writing the self and the collective through our practices. “Raqs” is Arabic, Persian, and Urdu for the ecstatic whirling of Dervishes, and drawing from there we translate it as “kinetic contemplation.” It’s an idea that you can be with others, as a collective, where others are a part of you, in movement with you.

In the dance of the Dervishes, there are two important elements: the earth and the sky. The body becomes a medium—with one hand up towards the sky, the body conducts energy from the sky, and the other hand pours it onto the earth. To us, this becomes a way to rethink the relationship between the sky and the earth, between life and the collective, between thought and action. It’s a rethinking that we have been doing through our practice in our twenty-five years together. Rethinking, and also acting on ideas of what collective life is, and what it means to cultivate—and to question—the capacities and the relationships that we build in the world.



11th Shanghai Biennial, China

In this way we contribute to a certain way of thinking our name—for it not to turn into a thing written in stone, for us to not become imprisoned by our own words and, also, for us this investigation acts as a horizon.

FC/NY: How did you come to work with this kind of co-curating practice?

RMC: We were born as a collective through writing and filmmaking, and into undertaking long-term research projects on the histories of cinematography, and anthropological photography. We wanted to do many things, and we did not define ourselves as artists or curators. We are somewhere still media practitioners that keep active: by curatorial and artistic processes, by writing, by teaching, setting up institutions and scenarios, and by being engaged in conversations with the coming generations. Our practice is something we always keep testing between us, and with other people in the world. In not following the certainty of any script, the idea is to keep moving and testing new terms.

We became curators after an invitation in 2006 (from Hans Christ and Iris Dressler at the Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart to curate a section within an exhibition titled *On Difference #2*). We realized that our practice had already had curatorial dimensions at Sarai. It was not long before we started working as curators—through an awareness of our curatorial agency—in specific contexts and situations.

We enjoy working with a lot of people. Like in a game of football, where many play together. This “playing together” is very important for us. That’s what makes curating a lively process—rethinking collective life and an enlargement in the number of people coalescing and colliding in one’s head, and in reality. A seasoned football player has over a thousand players in their mind at all times. In that sense, curation is akin to creating unlikely processions with many figures and movements; it is an act of co-creation that opens out new journeys and itineraries.

FC/NY: As Indian artists and curators, coming from a land made by a powerful history of art, strong traditions, and contradictions too, moving between the East and the West, how do you perceive the so-called Centre-Periphery dichotomies in artistic and curatorial practices?

RMC: The “Centre-Periphery” dichotomy was produced after World War II. It was the result of a thinking about development as something that goes through stages, and that certain societies and economies were at the “centre” of the global economy, while others were still waiting and were at the “periphery.” After the ‘70s, this understanding broke down because the world economy became very unstable and volatile. And now, in terms of GDP, the world economy has shifted from about 5 trillion USD in the ‘70s, to 75 trillion USD today. What we see now is an intensification, a reorientation, and re-routing of the production and circulation of both material and immaterial goods and wealth around the world. The “Centre-Periphery Dichotomy” cannot describe the world anymore.

What we have to notice is the entry of some new power blocs, cutting into the earlier solidity and locations of power. Institutional spheres, like museums, leverage a high quotient of hold on discourse. Fixed geographical locations of museums that are valued are increasingly facing a challenge from the multiplicity and mobility of other locations and their claim on discourse.

Over the last twenty years, the density of traffic of artworks, artists, and people encountering art has shifted away from the so-called “old centres.” Just look at Asia, at the biennials and triennials, and also consider new museums and other temporary shows, and you’ll see that the traffic is very intense—and that there is much more traffic of European artists to Asia than there are Asian artists travelling to Europe or America. The big problem is that this traffic is not represented, is not registered, is not comprehended as an occurrence that is here to stay. Rather, these are seen as aberrations and distractions from the “real” world of art, and they are dismissed as something resulting from neoliberalism. So, while it is a major reality, it remains minor in terms of discourse. In a subterranean way, discourse is multiple and multiplying from many sites, and will emerge as a significant force that will upset the confidence of established museums and art historical modalities.

Intellectual resources have to be built to do justice to the demand of these new densities and traffic, and we, as Raqs, try to argue for and build these resources, to be actively part of and contributing to the emergent polyphony—a polyphony that is poly-axial and generous in how it sees the world. When ideas are drawn from different resources—from what we, in our practice, call “sources”— then the questions we have will be different, as will the ways in which we understand this world. Otherwise, a lot of the time sources get drawn from histories of Europe and America. Now these are very dense histories, but when they are drawn on to try and encapsulate all that is happening in the world, they begin to thin. And then ideas of “colonialism” and “nationalism” keep getting reconfigured over and over again to try to accommodate other histories.

So then, the question is of traffic and densities between many nodes. A good way to think about this is through biological diversity. One finds that the density of biological diversity is in the so-called “South.” That is, the centres of biological diversity are away from the financial centres of the world. Similarly, centres of culture no longer map onto the institutional order of the world. Now, there are fantastic bio-labs in Europe and America, but biological diversity might be elsewhere, maybe in India or Indonesia, in South Africa, in Brazil, or somewhere else. So, this mapping of the world today in terms of institutional economics, onto other layers, is not possible. We need a different way, a recalibration.

One of the ways to do this is by rethinking these densities, asking questions about traffic in a different way, and by making an argument for multi- and poly-axial sources that allow this new geography to grow in us intellectually and discursively, not kept dependent on categories and concepts that are explaining it away. That is, we need to produce concepts and categories that then enable us to read the world not just in certain local or specific conditions, but which generate a capacity to ask of the world a different set of questions. There is a certain idea of categories that works in the world presently, which is to make us think about the world in terms of so-called “universal categories” on the one hand, and “regional experience” on the other. What we must accept is that there are “contending universalisms” in the world, and they ask us to think about a multi-axial, multi-source world.

FC/NY: And where do you see yourselves on the spectrum between centre and periphery?

RMC: We live in Delhi, a dense city that continues to grow fast, and with an economy that is amongst the fastest growing in the world. It is a highly unequal city, with

levels of toxicity rising in its air, water, soil. It has an economic and political climate that is going to throw up a lot of questions about the world. It is, you could say, at a cusp from where it may turn in any direction. In other words, a vectoral space that is dynamic and volatile. It can—in as few as ten years—change the intellectual and political terrain of the world. So, in that sense, it isn't peripheral to anything, whether one considers global questions of economics, or politics, or climate. It is axial; it is mobile; it is volatile in all matters. And yet, it is not at the centre of anything. Neither centre nor periphery captures the specificity of its being a part of many trajectories of and diversities in the world, or the decisive impact and effect it has on the world. And, though in an opposite way, it's the same for America. It is no longer the centre of the world, even in its self-image. Its new politics is based on the idea that it is becoming marginal, that it has to reposition itself, and that the rest of the world has become too independent, volatile, and diverse. So then, basically, the situation has changed in the world, and we need a different description. With “centre” or “periphery,” one is still holding on to a very odd idea of economy, institutions, and geo-political relationships.

FC/NY: What is the relation with your native country and its social, political, and cultural contexts in your practice? Have you faced any major problems or challenges in this respect?

RMC: As a country, India has more than one billion people, and over five to six thousand years of recorded history. That means a complicated landscape and cosmology, and a multi-millennial history of contradictions and conflicts. This temporal and spatial vastness is inspiring, but it is also marked by profound inequality and denigrating thoughts and habits that justify this inequality. Equality is a big challenge here. One of the things that we have learned in our travels—whether to Europe, Mexico, China, or Vietnam—is that equality can be a kind of material force of life. It is a surge; it is in infrastructure; it seeks expression in every encounter, with every form of labour. We keep on observing this: there is and can be a beautiful



Manifesta 7, The Rest of Now, 2007, Bozen, Italy

poetics of equality. Finding equality is a big challenge for the Indic civilisation. The politics and poetics of equality are being intensely fought, and fought for, here. This fight is changing the dynamics of all lives.

Also, there are questions of time and place. In our work, these come from our confidence in, and disquiet with, staying in Delhi, and the exuberant experiences of travelling in India. A lot of our works, both curatorial and artistic, are inflected by our thinking on the incongruous nature of time and place that we encounter. We need to re-imagine and re-articulate in order to produce new values.

FC/NY: We could consider urban research, transdisciplinary and participatory practices as part of your main issues. We saw them at *Manifesta 7 - The Rest of Now*, in Bozen (Italy) in 2007, where you reflected on the urban concept of the “residue.” At the Sarai Reader 09 exhibition in Gurgaon (India), you involved a lot of people from different fields of knowledge to relate their practice with the public. Also, at the 11th Shanghai Biennale (China), where the program 51 Personae re-imagined urban life, celebrating the city, the lives of people, their dreams...How did the locations and contexts influence each project?

RMC: Locations and contexts change things. For example, in *Manifesta*, it was clear that we were working in Alumix, an ex-aluminium factory. Bolzano is a very small town, but with a very fascinating twentieth-century history. The factory—today a residual place—was a very important site related to World War II. Apart from production, there was also the symbolic power of aluminium for the Fascist regime in Italy. Aluminium is still a very important material in all our lives. The thing to do was to investigate, materially and conceptually, the venue and this history; to create possibilities that we then shared with artists, both established and emerging, to realize works.



Sarai Reader 09, Gurgaon, India

The exhibition in Gurugram, Sarai Reader 09, had a completely different impulse. It was to create an open format that could allow over a hundred artists and practitioners to interact and produce works in public view, with public conversations. It was a nine-month-long process, which invented its rules and protocols as it went along on its course.

Shanghai is a city of 23 million, with a turbulent twentieth-century history. It built more skyscrapers in twenty years than New York made in a hundred. Here, we were encountering a very different set of questions. *51 Personae* emerged as we started to articulate the question of the life force of the inhabitants of the city, their ideas and skills, their intensities, their life worlds. The challenge was to travel through the city to make sense of its interstitial, edge-consciousness at work.

In our practice, we try to give a play to a sense of time, whether to lighten it, to dilate it, or to make detours from known chronologies. We need this to operate. It's how we find ways with which to narrate the world we live in, possibly dislodging habitual ways of seeing it.

Places change the questions we start with. Places interrogate us, and our ideas of the world. They interrogate us about who we are, and our assumptions, positions, directions, and movements. Places change the way we look at artworks, change the tonality of our speech, and the boundaries of our bodies. We like curating in this sense, this heightening of our relationship with places, becoming entangled and enveloped in uncharted dimensions.

Raqs Media Collective was formed in 1992 by Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta. The word 'raqs' in several languages denotes an intensification of awareness and presence attained by whirling, turning, being in a state of revolution. Raqs Media Collective takes this sense of 'kinetic contemplation' and a restless and energetic entanglement with the world and with time. Raqs practices across several forms and media; it makes art, produces performances, writes, curates exhibitions, and occupies a unique position at the intersection of contemporary art, philosophical speculation and historical enquiry. The members of Raqs Media Collective live and work in New Delhi, India.

Exhibitions curated by Raqs include 'The Rest of Now' (Manifesta 7, Bolzano, 2008), Sarai Reader 09 (Gurugram, 2012-13), INSERT2014 (New Delhi, 2014), 'Why Not Ask Again' (Shanghai Biennale 2016-2017) and 'In the Open or in Stealth' (MACBA, Barcelona, 2018). Their work has been exhibited at Documenta, the Venice, Sao Paulo, Manifesta, Istanbul, Shanghai, Sydney and Taipei Biennales. Their prospective, 'With an Untimely Calendar' was held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, in 2014-2015. Other solo shows at museums include at the Isabella Gardner Museum (Boston, 2012), CA2M (Madrid, 2014), MUAC (Mexico City, 2015), Tate Exchange (London, 2016), Fundacion Proa (Buenos Aires, 2015), Laumeier Sculpture Park (St Louis, 2016), the Whitworth Art Gallery (Manchester 2017), Firstsite (Colchester, 2018) and K21 (Dusseldorf, 2018).

Noriko Yamakoshi is a German born, Japanese art practitioner. Studied in Cultural Studies and Art History, she is currently under the Postgraduate Programme in Curating at Zhdk. She has engaged herself with exhibitions and program making under various forms of organizations in art along with research and writing projects. Exhibitions include: Sapporo International Art Festival (2014), Saitama Triennale (2015-16), “12 Rooms 12 Artists - from UBS Art Collection” (2016), solo exhibitions with Thomas Hirschhorn + Santiago Sierra, Yoshua Okón, Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, Oliver Beer (2015-2016), Moon Kyungwon & Jeon Joonho (2017).

Francesca Ceccherini is an independent curator, producer and journalist. Her research focuses on site specific projects, cross-disciplinary practices, performing and sound art especially, and works related to the memory and its reenactment. She worked for La Triennale di Milano and she takes part to Contemporary Locus (IT) from 2012, TAD Residency (IT) from 2017 and Exibart art magazine from 2014. In 2017 she was selected to the Curatorial Program Art Junction Residency in Udaipur (India). From 2018 she is part of the MAS Curating in Zurich researching about contemporary art practices, activism, communities, politics and participation. She is based between Zurich (CH) and Bergamo (IT), and member of NGBK in Berlin (DE).

An Interview with Jittima “Len” Pholsawek Pongpan Suriyapat

Educated at the College of Fine Arts, but leaving before graduation, Jittima Pholsawek spent her last year of college in 1983 helping the hill tribes in Huai Pong, Weing Pa Pao, Chiang Rai, in the northern part of Thailand. She was inspired by the political student movement against the dictatorship during the 6 October event, which later became known as the Thammasat University Massacre, from 1976. As part of that historical incident, lots of activists had relocated to the forests, hid away from the then-dictatorial government and quietly formed an underground movement. Jittima decided to follow this “Way of Youth Philosophy” to discover the real meaning of life while her institutional education had to stop and was not fulfilled.

Introduced by her college professor, she joined the Thai Volunteer Service Foundation and was sent up north. During her time with the tribes, she educated the children and helped villagers in their daily routines such as agriculture and childcare. In exchange, they provided her with food and accommodation. Spending several years with the villagers and experiencing things that the classroom couldn't have taught or provided, Jittima decided not to return to college for her final year. After spending some years with the foundation, writing books and helping the communities, she returned to an urban life, and then she began her career as a writer, illustrator and freelance artist to support herself. The starting point of her career as a performance artist began during the 1991 photo exhibition at the Goethe Institut, Bangkok. She met Mr. Chumpon Apisuk, one of the pioneers of Thai performance art, founder of Asiatopia and the Baan Tuek Art Center. Introduced to performance arts by Mr. Chumpon, she then began her career as a performance artist.

PS: I've heard that you are one of the selected artists for the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018, could you tell me more about your recent work?

JP: The work at the Bangkok Art Biennale is called *Boat of Hope*. It can be considered as installation art, but at the same time the boat could also be considered as a stage for performance art as well. When the sail is being raised, it is a sign that there will be something

going on or about to happen in this area. The boat is an actual boat of the local fishermen from the Southern part of Thailand, where there is an issue on the building proposal of coal power plants in Krabi and Thepa, which will affect the environment and the villagers' way of life. The boat is a symbol of clean energy, the energy that harms no one. Powered by wind and solar cells, the boat can produce enough energy to charge visitors' smartphones or any electronic device, and we provided this service for free to all visitors in need. Solar-powered coffee is being served as well to the visitors.

PS: Why did you choose the boat as a symbol to fight against the coal power plants? There are also alternatives to the boat to symbolize clean energy, such as windmills, or you can also use the solar panels alone.

JP: I selected the boat as a representation of my thought for several reasons. Firstly, in the Thai language you have an idiom called “in the same boat” — meaning we are together in the same situations and all of us will cope with them, no matter how hard or difficult they are and, we shall get through them together. Secondly, the boat is a symbol of clean energy. Powered by the wind, fishermen can leave the shore at night and return in the morning. They just need a good plan to make use of the natural energy in a meaningful way. We actually can make use of clean energy, but we choose to go for not-so-clean energy



Boat of Hope, Bangkok Art Biennale 2018, image courtesy of Thai News Pix

such as coal for some reasons, economic or even political. Thirdly, the area that was selected to build the power plant was in the southern part of Thailand, where fisheries are the main local industry. This boat acts as their spokesperson to communicate to the public what is about to happen to the area and what their choices can be.

PS: As I’ve heard, clean energy cannot supply people’s demand. That’s why they need to build additional power plants. Is this true?

JP: Actually, clean energy is enough to supply households’ usage, but it’s insufficient for industries’ usage. For example, the shopping centre we can see “just across the street” consumes all the power that one power plant would generate. Other industries such as manufacturing industries, those factories consume more power than you can imagine, and villagers around the power plant have to suffer from what they don’t need. They are suffering for those investors for the capitalism. The pollution generated from the power plant also changes the environment around the site, which means it affects the community directly.

PS: It seems like you know a lot about the locals. What is your working process, and how do you work with them?

JP: We performance artists are not working alone—we are together with the activists, news reporters, environmental conservators, researchers and several foundations. Before starting to work, we always gather information and context around the scenes. You may think that the locals know nothing; actually the locals know everything. By “everything,” I mean they know even more than we expected. They know the impact and consequences of what’s happening to their area. They know that their way of life will not be the same. They hold alternatives and different approaches for the decision makers, but they can do almost nothing for some “reasons.”

PS: This is very interesting for the theme of Centre–Periphery. Can this be a good example to illustrate this dichotomy?

JP: There are so many things happening around the country and, of course, not only in the centre—as you may called a capital city or big cities. If you live in the big city, let’s say Bangkok, some information from several situations might be filtered or could not reach you. You are being attracted by other information or entertainment, and you may think they are not happening.

Interacting with the locals, you start to realize that they know everything from the environmental topic to government policy to the hidden agenda of



Boat of Hope, Bangkok Art Biennale 2018, image courtesy of Thai News Pix

the project. But they can do nothing, their voices are not strong enough. That’s why they need us to speak for them; the news reporter and the news itself can be a type of media that reach out to the public, but sometimes news alone becomes unattractive. Sometimes these two terms are being physically disconnected.

PS: That’s why you are invited to do art projects with the locals? Let’s say other stakeholders invite or collaborate with you.

JP: Art to me is one medium or one way to communicate messages to the public, the same as news on television. But when you make art, it attracts more of the public, and it also engage the locals to participate and interact with the outsiders. Arts bring us together and speaks the situations or issues out loud. Sometimes, news reporters also need interesting content to attract audience—just series of pictures of dirty beaches, dead birds or fish, or a bunch of garbage and polluted air could be boring. All kinds of arts that we do with the community could also help the media to have more “ingredients” for their content. The media needs us to be a part of their news, while we also need the media to broadcast our activities to the public as well; we are a part of each other.

PS: So, your art is considered a form of message from the periphery to the centre?

JP: Art is something that reflects and amplifies the situations, and also the thought of the artist, but when you make performance art or art with communities you are not speaking alone; the communities also speak with you. So, from just your speech, it becomes “our” speech. When we do art, it brings things together, and the art also reinforces the story and can be good evidence of the occurrences. Performance art has its own character; unlike painting or sculpture, it has a strong power and tension bouncing from the performer and viewers.

PS: And do the locals understand your message? Even someone with an artistic background could not get the whole message if it was too abstract or symbolic.

JP: Never underestimate the locals, they get the message even better than someone with an artistic background. When you have a lot of knowledge, you always judge or consume things from your mind, from the knowledge that you have but not with your heart.



Let me Perform, 2018, image courtesy of the artist

People around the area know nothing about performance art, but that doesn’t mean knowing no theories forbids them to enjoy and be a part of the art. During the performance they are like the empty glasses prepared for the water to be poured in. They are the ones that are confronted with situations. So, it’s not difficult at all to convey the message to them, unlike the people who are not familiar with the local situation, it’s more difficult for them to get the message. Maybe they have to get to know first what is happening, what the problem is, what affects the communities.

PS: Is there any impact from your projects after the performance? Any good examples?

JP: The Salaween River Project would be a good example in this case. This project reflects issues on the government’s movements in the Salaween Area. This area is the border and also a shared natural resource between Myanmar and Thailand. The Thai and Myanmar governments initiated several electric-generating dams along the whole river basin in Myanmar, and the Thai government planned to buy electricity from Myanmar. We are not against the project and the

dams, but without a proper environmental impact assessment, this project would wipe away several villages and also their heritage. Along the river, there are several tribes and villagers, farmers who have lived there for generations, and without a proper study, maintaining them would be impossible. When the government project was made public, only positive impacts were announced, not the negative impact on the locals and the environment. As it's an international issue, artists from both Thailand and Myanmar are working together in the Thai-Myanmar Collaborative Art Project to express our thoughts towards the issue. The project rose awareness about the locals and the public from both countries. Also, there were stories published in the news. Art itself amplifies the message and conveys the message to the public.

PS: So, the situation became a public issue after the project?

JP: It is a public issue already, but we helped make it reach the broader public—we amplified it. When there is awareness from the public, the voice from the locals became louder. Media also became interested in the topic and started to do some research, creating documentaries and broadcasting the issue for both the positive and negative impact of the project. Afterwards, the government had to put the project on hold

and announce in-depth research on the impact before making any further moves. Maybe this is a good example of how the peripheral can make the voice that reaches the centre, or the capital.

PS: When you initiated the project, how did you obtain financial support? How can you make the project sustainable?

JP: It depends. For the Bangkok Art Biennale, we get support from companies such as ThaiBev. Some projects were supported by the related stakeholders, especially the organization related to the environmental conservation. For most of the project, we are supporting ourselves. We do not think about the financial that much; we are artists that make art, not commercial projects. The only way to sustain the art and the event is to continue working on it and not giving up.

PS: How did you generate revenue from the performance art? Another form of art such as painting or sculpture can be sold, but performance art is a happening. Is it more difficult to make a living with this form of art? How can this kind of art be valued?

JP: Some performance artists are making money with the printed materials from their performances, such as photography with autographs, books or the recorded (film/video) copy of their works. For me, performance



Let me Perform, 2018, image courtesy of the artist

art should not be valued or priced or owned. How much does it cost to save and preserve the heritage? How much does it cost to sustain the generations and continue the traditions? Performance art is the impact released from the performer to the audience, and the impact shouldn't be evaluated. But the value of the art lies in its consequences and its duty that serves the public domain.

Jittima Pholsawek is an artist, a feature writer, a short story writer, and a poetess. She has devoted herself to several kinds of art such as photography, mixed media, and performance art since 1991 and was one of the initiators in “Desire-Tradition,” a women’s art project, which later was developed into “Women Manifesto International Women Art Festival.” She was also a founder of the community art project that has proceeded for 14 years. This project focuses on social, environmental, and cultural issues. The rapid social, environmental, and cultural changes resulting from the giant development projects in the Salween River, Kong River, Uraklavoy village on Lanta Island in Krabi province, and Dawei town in Myanmar have immensely captured the artist’s attention. In 2017, Jittima won the Manus Siansing Award from the Pridi Banomyong Institute in Thailand. The award

was a significant honor for those who have devoted themselves consistently to social practice (art) for over ten years. Her art and writing work consistently reflect the inequality among human beings, the exploitation of the underprivileged and minority groups, cultural oppression, and natural resources colonization by humans and corporations. Jittima is currently assuming various roles, such as a director of community art projects, a committee member of the Asiatopia festival, and an editor of Klang – Kuan – Wan publications. (*Biography from Bangkok Art Biennale*)

Pongpan Suriyapat is a CAS student at ZHdK in Zurich. Before joining the program, he worked for a museum design company in Bangkok. He is responsible for the management, design, exhibition settings, storytelling and multimedia / interactive system of the well-known exhibitions and museums all over Asia and Europe. He also uses his spare time to work with kinetic sculptures and interactive installation. Pongpan is now working closely with the Artists in South East Asia to enhance their Community Art Projects with Digital Media along with being a design consultant for the Swiss Tech Companies in St.Gallen, Switzerland. He got his M.Sc. in Art and Technology from Chalmers University of Technology in Göteborg, Sweden.



Let me Perform, 2018, image courtesy of the artist

Interview with the Founders of POST-MUSEUM: Jennifer Teo and Woon Tien Wei Carolina Sanchez

Post-Museum is an independent cultural and social space in Singapore, founded in 2007 by husband-and-wife artist-activists Jennifer Teo and Woon Tien Wei, which aims to encourage and support a thinking and pro-active community, locally and internationally. It is an open platform for examining contemporary life, promoting the arts, and connecting people.

It was located in a central area in Singapore and functioned as a rental venue as well as organizing and hosting various events and activities including exhibitions, residency, workshops, research, community projects, among others. Currently nomadic, they will continue to arrange various events and activities in different spaces.

CS: Post-Museum is an active independent cultural and social space. Could you tell us something more about Post-Museum? What inspires and drives you?

JT/WTW: The name refers to “what is beyond the museum.” Post-Museum emerged as a kind of impulse responding to the cultural shift in Singapore’s “Renaissance”—a period of rapid cultural development and liberalization introduced through new cultural and social policies by the Singaporean government. Singapore Studies scholars critique the cultural development as economically driven. Singapore’s Renaissance may have elevated the position of the arts, but it has been limited in its reach. We believed that art should change the world, or it should participate in shaping a better world.

CS: Currently nomadic, you continue your practices. How is living as a nomad? How do you achieve visibility and accessibility to your audience?

JT/WTW: Before being nomadic, we operated a cultural space in two shop houses on Rowell Road in the Kampong Kapur area of Singapore between 2007 and 2011. During this time, Post-Museum became a place to ‘hunt’ for a network of cultural practitioners, from students to academics, artists to activists. That confluence of people and their practices allowed us to see how diverse practices could convene and learn from one other—how people could come together, find something in that encounter, and go forth and make something out of that. This period was essential in formulating our practice. Being ‘nomadic’ allows our practice to be ‘place’ driven. We are interested in how we can “practise the city” in more meaningful ways. To “practise the city” for us means asserting and claiming the “right to the city.”

CS: You rely on contributions from individuals or very little corporate sponsorship, and probably no government support. In this way, what role has the political system played in this project?

JT/WTW: This was our initial operation ethos. During Rowell Road's space, we wanted Post-Museum to be independent. By this, we didn't want to take any funding from government agencies in order to maintain autonomy in our programs and activities. In a way, this autonomy was about creating a kind of 'safe' space for interesting connections in our community to take place. So, we didn't really seek out much institutional support then. That position has changed, as our politics transitioned at the time that we left Rowell Road. These days, we want to see more public engagement with government agencies. Expanding on the idea of asserting and claiming the "right to the city" refers to one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.

CS: Since it is an open platform, what is your relationship with the centre? Where do you place Post-Museum on the spectrum between centre and periphery? (Let's assume the State is a centre and the independent is the periphery.)

JT/WTW: In recent years, Singapore has adopted the strategy of place management to inject so-called *heart and soul* into the city. This strategy refers to similar strategies adopted in other cities like New York and Paris, known as "placemaking," and aimed at developing participatory places and improving the quality of life for its residents. Rather than thinking that placemaking is reserved for urban planners—i.e., the centre—we should think of it as an activity in which all humans are partaking. Here, we refer to human geography's notion of place and advocate for this idea that every single one of us is a human agent capable of transforming the world because we are always engaged in the process of placemaking. We create places so that our projects can take place, and that the activity of placemaking is, as Robert David Sack would say, how we help make the world or conjure a reality. It isn't so much about who makes these places, but what is our place in these places? How do these places figure in the world we envision? Adopting a nomadic strategy is a way to see the city-state as a site to operate and at the same time as a place which *needs to be practised*.

CS: In the specific case of the art context: how do you see yourself as positioned within a global contemporary art discourse? And how do you communicate with your audience?

JT/WTW: Generally, we are driven or preoccupied by discourses which happen close by. So, we don't spend a lot of time making sense of our place within the global contemporary art discourse. Although, the global is defined quite differently in different places, isn't it? In that sense, it is not easy to talk about audiences without some grounding of where we are speaking from. Perhaps, we can think of the global art world(s) as international exhibitions motivated by an ambition to be global or to present a globalised worldview.

Sociologist Terence Chong sees bureaucratic middle management, who have increasing power and play a decisive role in shaping the cultural landscape—and who also tend to have an appetite for art which creates spectacles and which is plugged into the global—, as having a distaste for art that is critical or not aligned with what is perceived as the nation's value. With the participation of governments and corporations, we are witnessing these massive flows of capital into the art world. This is a worrying trend which is happening globally, and we see the shrinking artistic freedoms as a consequence—mirroring a world that is increasingly unjust

and unfree. Perhaps, we, as audiences and cultural workers, need to reflect on our roles and responsibilities, and the actions we could take to counter that.

CS: About your activities, how did you come to work with *communities* (collaborators, artists, curators, audiences)? In what way have cultural differences within the collaborating group (or between artists in residence) played a role in shaping the project?

JT/WTW: We continue to be inspired by and collaborate with this network of allies from the Rowell Road space. We keep a broad connection with friends from civil society movements, urban studies, arts and culture fields. In that way, our activities are how these worlds collide. For example, The Soup Kitchen project is made up of volunteers who are interested in working with the urban poor in a neighbourhood in the town. It is very clear for us that we are not trying to establish an art “centre” but a peer-to-peer network.

CS: In term of the future, how do you think the strategy for sustainability will evolve?

JT/WTW: Recently, we have been formulating the idea of the in-curatable within the framework of national institutions or the art historical canon here. The in-curatable is a range of reasons and logic preventing institutions and art historical discourses from finding the curatorial vocabulary and the curatorial will to allocate resources to the care of the art in question. Often, the collective form is in-curatable because it is usually subsumed within the contemporary reification of art. What we hope to draw from the mode of collectivising is a kind of ‘action’ that always seems missing from the art. Today, it is more difficult for the art world to disentangle from institutions as we become more dependent on state support. In this age of precarious artistic labour, there is so much insecurity and fear that it takes courage to question and critique institutions. Yet, it is ever more urgent that we do so. Because the in-curatable framed our freedoms—it clouds our value judgements and warps our curatorial conscience. In that way, it isn’t so much about sustaining collectives but how we learn from *collective forms*. For us, *collective forms* remind us of their potency. They offer agency for each subject to find another, the ability to jump across geographic divides, and attempt to speak to power.

<https://www.post-museum.org/about.html>

Post-Museum is an independent cultural and social space in Singapore which aims to encourage and support a thinking and pro-active community. It is an open platform for examining contemporary life, promoting the arts, and connecting people. In addition to their events and projects, they also curate, research, and collaborate with a network of social actors and cultural workers. Currently operating nomadically, they continue to organise and host various events and activities in different spaces.

Carolina Sanchez is a teacher, a curator and a CAS Curating student at the ZHdK. She works at *la rada - spazio per l'arte contemporanea*, based in Locarno, and collaborates with various cultural independent art spaces and associations. Her curatorial line focusses on the Swiss art scene between different regions with links to the international art scene.

Interview with Anuradha Vikram – 18th Street Arts Center, Los Angeles Domenico Roberti & Eveline Mathis

18th Street Arts Center is the largest artist residency program in California and among the leading programs in the United States. Founded as a non-profit in 1988, the space has a history of supporting new genres and feminist art practices. Situated at 18th Street and Olympic in Santa Monica's historic Pico Neighborhood, today the Center fosters and supports the work of Los Angeles-based and international artists and has built bridges to like-minded artist communities around the globe.

Domenico Roberti / Eveline Mathis: Where do you see yourself and the Arts Center on the spectrum between centre and periphery, and how important is the location of it within the neighbourhood, Los Angeles, and the global art world? And does this play a relevant role in the development of the exhibition program?

Anuradha Vikram: 18th Street is both peripheral and central. We are located within the Los Angeles metro area which is one of the most active and visible contemporary art communities worldwide. We are based on the Westside, which was historically a hub for artists but has become increasingly inaccessible due to the rising cost of living and gentrification along the waterfront. We are an important connector between regional artists based locally and international artists and currents. Our programmes are designed to cultivate these connections.

DR/EM: Were the institution and its programme affected by the gentrification of the area? And vice versa?



Brendan Fernandes, *I'M DOWN*, 2017. Mural at 18th Street Arts Center. Photo: Jeny Amaya. Courtesy of 18th Street Arts Center.



18th Street Arts Center, Pico Walk: *We Are Family*, 2017. Courtesy of 18th Street Arts Center. Courtesy of 18th Street Arts Center.



Mariángeles Soto-Díaz, *Instituto Experimental Tropical del Amazonas*, 2018. Performance at 18th Street Arts Center. Photo by Erica Rodriguez. Courtesy of 18th Street Arts Center.

AV: 18th Street Arts Center is fortunate that our founder endowed our institution with the deed to our property in Santa Monica. As such, we have not been displaced by gentrification, but we have observed and experienced its effects on our community of artists and collaborators. We created a project, CultureMapping90404.org, to bring resources and attention to the effects of gentrification and to develop tools for reversing some of those effects, in collaboration with local activists and community-based organisations.

DR/EM: Do you feel your practice has enough recognition and visibility, and what would you do in order to improve it?

AV: Moving from the San Francisco Bay Area to the Los Angeles region five years ago created invaluable opportunities to increase the visibility of my practice. Even so, the relative isolation of the Westside can be an impediment to press coverage and other forms of art world attention that come with resources attached. We perennially struggle to attract resources commensurate with the value of what we do, because we are working within a culture that views artistic expression as an “elitist” pursuit. Public education programmes, and attention to increasing access for audiences from a range of communities and socio-economic backgrounds, are strategies we employ to address these challenges. One element of the local cul-

ture that could change would be for LA-area arts audiences to direct more support toward emerging and experimental artists locally.

DR/EM: With the Center having a history of “performance art, activism, social justice, feminism and the gay rights movement in its DNA,” how does this relate to your curatorial practice?

AV: Fundamental to my curatorial practice is the goal of increasing opportunities, support, and visibility for marginalised artists. The majority of artists we support through the commissioning program are artists of colour, women, and LGBTQIA-identified artists. We don’t make the identity of the artists a theme or a talking point, we simply direct support toward their practices commensurate with the level of support that cis white male artists conventionally receive, to allow them to realise their ideas with the same level of ambition.

DR/EM: How do you deal with diversity and social, ethnic, and political representation when establishing the programme of the Center and within your personal research and practice?

AV: Diversity is just the beginning. To fully decolonise an institution, it becomes necessary to consider how representation is encouraged or inhibited at every level, from



18th Street Arts Center, *Culture Mapping 90404*, 2016 – ongoing, cultural asset mapping project online. culturemapping90404.org. Courtesy of 18th Street Arts Center.



18th Street Arts Center, *Pico Block Party*, 2018. Photo: Erica Rodriguez. Courtesy of 18th Street Arts Center.

supporters such as foundations and donors, to board members, to staff, as well as the artists we serve. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider how an institution does or does not make space for diverse audiences by allowing for the public to stake a claim on who gets to be called an artist.

DR/EM: Do city/state funding bodies or local or state or national government play a role in supporting this project?

AV: 18th Street receives support from a variety of federal, state, local, private, and individual sources. Our Culture-Mapping90404.org project was launched with support from the private, California-based James Irvine Foundation and the state-funded California Arts Council. We also get support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, and the City of Santa Monica Cultural Affairs Department. The role of public funding is significant. At the same time, public funding is not sufficient to support our programs and operations without private investment.

Anuradha Vikram is a writer, curator, and educator and has been Artistic Director at 18th Street Arts Center since 2014.

Domenico Ermanno Roberti is an architect and curator based in Zürich. His recent research focuses on the links between architecture and gender studies, more specifically the significance of the role played by the manipulation of space in the creation of normalised identities of gender. He holds a MSc in Architecture from the Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, Switzerland and he is currently a postgraduate student in Curating at the Zürich University of the Arts.

Eveline Mathis, based in Zürich, has a degree in communication and is working since several years in the advertising industry as a project manager and art buyer. As a postgraduate student in Curating at the Zürich University of the Arts, her current focus in the curatorial research is on sound art, its emergence through history and ways of perception in the visual, spatial and epistemological context.

A conversation with Lisa Biedlingmaier about the Kunstverein Wagenhalle e.V./ Container City

Beatrice Fontana

The Art Association Wagenhalle was founded in Stuttgart in 2004 in the former wagon repair hall of the Royal Württemberg State Railways. Since then, it has grown incredibly, acquiring a multidisciplinary and international character. More than 100 members, active in all fields of art and culture production, share studios and ideas, giving life to a remarkable series of events, exhibitions, and concerts.

I met Lisa Biedlingmaier in a cozy café, in the middle of Zurich. She told me about herself and her experience growing up in Georgia, when the country was still part of the Soviet Union, until the age of thirteen, at which time she moved to Stuttgart. There she studied art education at the Academy of Fine Arts. After school, she decided to move to Zurich, where she got a degree in photography at the ZHdK (Zürcher Hochschule der Künste). Since 2005, she has maintained an active arts practice, based between Zurich and Stuttgart, and as a member of the Wagenhalle *Kunstverein*. Lisa started her own curatorial project in 2014.

Beatrice Fontana: Thank you, Lisa, for taking this time. You work as an independent artist and curator, and you are member of the Wagenhalle Kunstverein. How would you describe your position within it?

Lisa Biedlingmaier: I am one of the many artists who are members of the Wagenhalle in Stuttgart. The Art Association is first and foremost a community of shared studios. Only in 2014, I started to work on my curatorial practice there—at first as part of a project known as *peekaboo!* in conjunction with Bernadette Wolbring, and then later, on my own. The infrastructures at our disposal, within the exhibition space, resemble those of a self-organised, artist-run space. That means that only the bare rooms are available. There are no employees or technicians whatsoever helping with the facilities usually needed for an exhibi-

tion. Now and then you get some help from a kind studio neighbour.

This situation will hopefully change as soon as we are able to move back to the official Wagenhalle space, which is under renovation at the moment. During the construction period, in fact, all the exhibitions are being held outside at the Container City, in shipping containers, located in the proximity. The move back to the Wagenhalle is planned for summer of 2019. We will then also have a multifunctional room at our disposal. In the Container City setting, my curatorial activity could be described as follows: I do the research and plan the exhibition; I invite the artists; I write the texts; I apply for funding. Next, I help the artists to set up; I offer and prepare the rooms; I clean the exhibition space; I drive to the hardware store; I communicate with the graphic designers and print the flyers; I hang up the posters. Finally, I take care of the space during the opening hours, and, to conclude, I remove the exhibition; I send back the artworks; I wash the laundry; I clean up the showroom; and lastly, I close the budget and make the final report. My partner usually re-paints the showroom, cooks for the artists, and put his workshop and his bar at the artists' disposal.

BF: Does the centre/periphery dichotomy—as a spatial metaphor as well as social model—play a role in your artistic and curatorial work? Could you define it?

LB: If you consider the art scene as being divided into network-islands, and you acknowledge that the chances of island-hopping are relatively small, you have no real choice but to practise within your own range of action. Of course, as we continue to orient ourselves within the major international discourses and exhibitions, the feeling of being peripheral remains anyway. So does the dichotomy.



Martina Wegener & Frédéric Ehlers, *DUAL / DÜBEL / DUELL / DUETT*, 2016



Exhibition view *Refine All Pores* curated by peekabool, 2016

Artistically, I have dealt with this topic in the video work *Hearing about Athens* (2017). In the video one can see the Container City and hear the documenta 14 radio from Athens. The physical location of the recording on the one hand and the possibility of receiving audio from major international events through media on the other, is a metaphor for both the dichotomy and the interconnectedness between the so-called alternative art world, and the established one.

Curatorially, I tried on one hand to contribute to the Stuttgart's art scene by inviting non-local artists (from Zurich, Vienna, Saarbrücken), and at the same time to cement the public character of the *Kunstverein's* activities. No one is interested in artists as long as they remain working in their ateliers. But if one contributes to the cultural life of the city, they will finally have the opportunity to be noticed, and to get the necessary financial support. This is something that has actually happened—in fact, we have received regular institutional funding from the city since 2018.



Foundation for Freckles, 2015 curated by peekaboo!
With Linda Semadeni, Untitled, 2015

In general, the accessibility to places like the Wagenhalle is higher and the borders are more permeable and undefined [compared to other artistic institutions in the area] thanks to the plurality of the events we are offering. One often feels the need to oppose something in the world out there: the world of commerce and political frustrations. To project qualities such as care, community, and anti-commerce. In a way, I think we became an oasis for those who are interested in topics such as alternative consumption, who would like to become active in this area themselves.

With the new place and the institutional support, however, we must reinvent ourselves and develop a new concept that helps to protect this free *Geist*. It would be a pity if too much bureaucracy were to narrow those possibilities.

BF: Considering the specific case of the *Kunstverein Wagenhalle/Container City*, did the peculiarity of its location (in a central position in the city of Stuttgart, but with a strong peripheral character) add value or attribute different meaning to the work that was produced there?

LB: It's all about possibilities. In the end, we adapt to the situation and try to make the best of it, which means using it productively. And the advantages of the Wagenhalle/Container City in that sense are obvious. The rent is cheap, the rooms relatively big, and one can feel a disorderly but creative atmosphere on site. It will be interesting to see if this character will persist when we will move into the renovated building. The peripheral character of the area gives one the feeling of being far away from the hectic city and of being able to work in peace. At the same time the city can be reached in ten minutes.

Places inspire and offer possibilities. And that is how my autonomous curatorial work started: through a seldom used room that happened to be free at the time, and that was at my disposal. These rooms are like a vacuum that asks to be filled. Of course, if you exhibit in containers, then you cannot help but be reminded of precarious living conditions, and that is obviously reflected in one's work, for example in *Hearing about Athens* or *Discover your Soul*.

The invited artists are usually my personal guests, which creates a dynamic that goes far beyond a regular working relationship. You tackle things together and try to make the most out of what you have. I real-

ized that the more money is involved, the more people expect and are tempted to negotiate rather than collaborate with you. The same thing applies to me: when I perform or create without an official engagement, I try at least to have a good experience and a good time.

The need for an infrastructure like the Wagenhalle arose from the urge to have a room in which larger projects could be realised, workshops could be held, and a gateway to the public—in the form of exhibitions—could be opened. However, shortly after having found the space, our plans appeared to crumble: a report from a fire protection officer said that no external audience would be allowed to enter the hall. That was exactly when we, as peekaboo!, were planning our first big exhibition there.

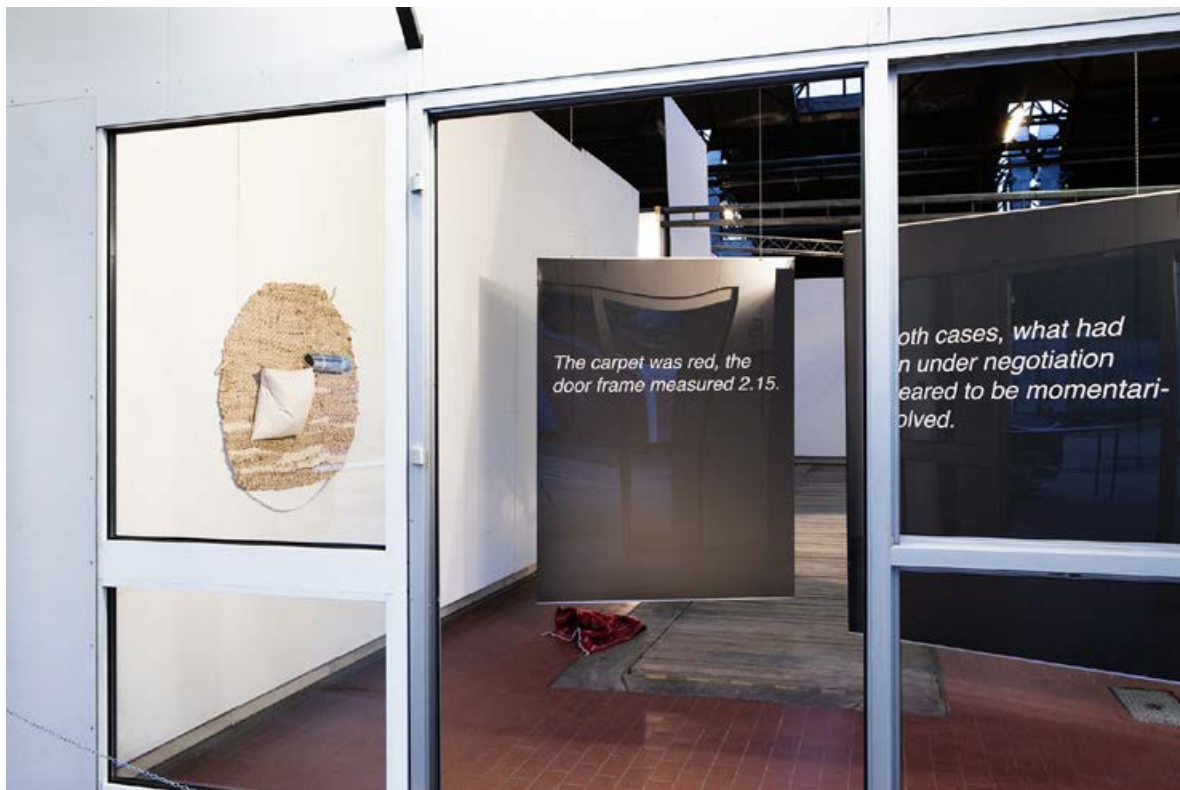
We needed to think quickly! In an effort to make it work, we set up the exhibition right behind the four big gates of the hall. This allowed the audience to enjoy the artistic work without physically entering the space—it was enough to stand on the threshold. We added a series of truck trailers and containers, placing them on the opposite side of the gates, and turning them into open white cubes. This makeshift exhibition concept remained the same for the following three

years. Out of emergency a very original and creative mood was generated!

The topic of gentrification and the question of our positioning as artists in the urban space, which is always also a political and social space, remained present and concrete, giving life to many site-specific works. In 2017, when the construction site for the renovation of the Wagenhalle started, we had to move to the opposite parking lot and into the so-called Container City, a group of ateliers made out of shipping containers and built by the artists themselves.

BF: Which part of the community do you try to address with your projects, and which part actually becomes involved? In other words, how does the neighbourhood respond?

LB: Everyone is welcome! At the last exhibition, *Humus Sapiens*, which was accompanied by four days of workshops, the urban gardening project *Stadtacker* was also involved. The workshops were free and open to all. But in addition to the participating scientists (Global Hackteria), it was, above all, artists who came. That is because our newsletter is mainly directed at, and read by, people already participating in an artistic



Foundation for Freckles, 2015 curated by peekaboo! With Joanna Nordin, Arid Margins, and A Real-Life Event.



Petra Köhle und Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin, *black. Blue skies becoming almost*, 2017



About Glass Ceilings and Sticky Floors, 2014 curated by peekaboo! With works by Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, *Normal Work*, 2007

environment. I usually try to involve different people by corresponding the opening hours of the exhibition space with the concerts taking place in the adjacent venue. Thus, that subsection of the public that is interested in music can also enjoy the exhibitions. The thing is, although everyone is welcome, we noticed that some mediation and translation of the space is needed in order to enable us to speak with different kinds of public. Not in the literal sense of the word, but in a figurative sense. As we all know, contemporary art is not very easy to communicate.

Either a project is designed to appeal to specific groups of the population. In that case, you adapt your language to their particular knowledge and integrate this specialised way of speaking into the concept. Alternatively, the project is designed to appeal to a broader audience, and you find yourself in the situation where you have to sacrifice complexity, and break down the contents more thoroughly.

Even at the university, this twist was needed if you wished to work in an interdisciplinary manner. As far as the neighbourhood is concerned, I would say that we do not have an immediate neighbourhood, as we are shut in between the cemetery and the railway tracks. But that comes with a few advantages of its own, such as the potential for a vibrant music scene.

BF: In your opinion, does the spatial position of cultural and social projects change the attitude of municipal and institutional players towards them?

LB: To the city we first needed to show that, as artists, we are worth being promoted and supported. You might know that the geographical position of the city, within a mountain basin, leads to land scarcity and high real estate prices. So, given the central position of the Wagenhalle, we demanded a lot! That resulted in us having to prove that we could be internationally acknowledged. When our project grew from being just a temporary use of an empty space to something bigger, the first step was to stand up as one voice: the voice of the Kunstverein. And when we had to choose an alternative location, during the construction site for the renovation of the Wagenhalle, it became vital not to have our working place moved to the periphery of the city. That resulted in Container City. Stay in place, no compromise!

Connection to the cultural life and the proximity to the supply centres play an important role for artists.

Indeed, when you're there at Container City, you can hardly believe that you're not in the periphery, but actually in the centre of Stuttgart. This space was long left free for the major railroad project *Stuttgart 21*. Due to the massive resistance and protests of the citizens, the construction was delayed, which naturally suited us. Now, with the city having invested money in the Wagenhalle, our right to exist has been certified, and we receive institutional support. In that sense the central location is obviously relevant.

BF: What is your strategy for furthering the project as you grow into the future?

LB: Working in the new space, from the summer of 2019, will be a major challenge for us, wanting to make use of it as successfully and intensively as possible. In addition to exhibitions, theatre performances, and concerts, much more will then take place. That is why I think it would be advisable to maintain a high level of experimental spirit. We are, after all, a cultural production site, which means not only established cultural



Petra Köhle und Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin, *black. Blue skies becoming almost*, 2017



Anna Witt und Ulrika Jäger, *Care*, 2018



Humus Sapiens, 2018



Lisa Biedlingmaier, *Hearing about Athens*, Video still, 2017

workers should be involved. It is important that young artists or students, for example, get the chance to experiment on their projects. As an artist, the role of the curator is also a peripheral activity for me. In fact, I do not aspire to a curatorial career. While for many an off-space can be a career springboard, I do not pursue any further goals in that sense. I experience that as a huge freedom, which enables me to also act as an artist here.

For me, the independent alternative music scene has been inspiring. I have experienced it for over ten years, here at the Wagenhalle. Beyond the commercial, they celebrate themselves, without giving account to anyone. Unfortunately, when a similar concept is applied to art, it is unfortunately associated with a much bigger commitment, and also—as art is always dependent on external subsidies—with bigger financial efforts.

In conclusion, I think that peripheral and central as ideas are not disconnected from each other, but rather that the one flows into the other. We could say that the peripheral is the breeding ground for the established.

Lisa Biedlingmaier is an artist and a curator. She is internationally active since 2011 with exhibitions, performances and screenings. Alongside she is an active member of the Art Association *Wagenhalle* in Stuttgart and of the research groups *forschungsgruppe-f* and *BAD LAB*. She is also Co-founder of the *Peekaboo!* curatorial duo, and part of the performance group *Feinstaub*. Lisa currently lives and works in Zurich.

Beatrice Fontana is an architect and urban researcher. In 2009 she co-founded the architectural office *hoffmannfontana*, which specializes in temporary re-use of large buildings and urban structures. Her research as part of the MAS Curating at *Zhdk* is focused on political discourse within the curatorial thinking. Beatrice lives and works in Zurich.

www.lisabiedlingmaier.net
<https://www.lisabiedlingmaier.net/kv-wagenhalle>

Interview with Dena Beard

Paola Granati & Ronny Koren

The Lab is a non-profit experimental art and performance space located in the Mission district in San Francisco. Founded in 1984, The Lab gives funding, time, and space to traditionally underrepresented artists and art forms. This assigns great focus to artists whose economics and cultural realities are shadowed by political, social, and artistic organizational models.

RK/PG: Tell us about your background. What is it like to move from an institution like the Berkeley Museum of Art to such an alternative space like The Lab, a renowned centre for alternative artistic practices?

DB: I bumped into the profession of curating “accidentally” for the very first time in Santa Barbara. Being a curator is a position that requires lots of flexibility, a material engagement with the world at large that pressures radical ideas and activism, and it requires a flexibility and an applied understanding of what it means to be in the world as opposed to research or academic learning. This was appealing to me, and I was fascinated by working with artists.

So, when I got the job at the Berkeley Art Museum as an assistant curator, I was looking forward to changing something. I had known about the museum’s work for a really long time as embedded in academic research while being very wild at the same time. The BAMPFA (Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive) used to be housed in this beautiful brutalist building that was completely inhospitable for art: you walked in and it was completely concrete, you couldn’t imagine how art could be shown there. And yet it was, and it was a very complicated relationship. The museum was always putting pressure on the work, and the work was alternately putting pressure on the museum, so there was a kind of friction there that I really loved. I think my issue with working with museums arose simply because they were not paying artists well, and I saw so many artists and art spaces being evicted as a result of the rising rents in the Bay Area—it was really sad. I was working with artists for three to four years on big exhibition projects, and suddenly they would get an eviction notice. Artists are living on a poverty scale that is completely untenable in the Bay Area. There is not a sense of reciprocity—that the museum would take care of the content providers that it has commissioned to work with—and I felt a big disconnection there with how the museum itself valued the work that was being produced and the labour that was actually put into the work produced. This disassociation extended to the installation crew, the registrars. There is a complicated value system at play. So I wanted to pare things back to a situation where everyone who is involved understands the values that are being challenged or upheld, and together we could put pressure on a given system, and also to feel complicit within it. Again, to understand reciprocity within the creation of an exhibition. To be able to say that this exhibition reflects some kind of value system we want to see in the world, or that it actually reflects something that is being devalued or is being confounded by the current ways of seeing the world. The museum did this to some extent, but the stakes were never high enough. The world it was trying to put pressure on was never actually changed by the work itself. My interest in art stems from my belief that it truly has a power, and I was not seeing that power conveyed in an institutional context.

The Lab was yet another place in the Bay Area that was about to close. The Bay Area in the '60s and '70s was a huge incubator for models of the alternative art space, but we have lost 35% of our art spaces over the past five years. The Lab was founded in 1984, and it was the first interdisciplinary art space of its kind, the first place that proposed video, film, sound, literary, and visual art that could be shown together. In 2013, I found out it was \$150,000 in debt. I got a team of lawyers and tried to dig it out of debt. And we did it. We managed to take it out of the abyss, and we rehabilitated it. I quit my job at the BAMPFA and started at The Lab with only \$10,000 dollars in our bank account. It was a risky situation.



Jacqueline Gordon, *Inside You Is Me*, October 1-31, 2016; courtesy of The Lab, San Francisco.

RK / PG: It's very brave of you!

DB: I was bored. It was either that or leave art entirely. I wanted the opportunity to propose something that was serious, that was really game-changing. And that proposal hinged on the idea that I would give artists a huge amount of money, \$25,000-\$100,000, to do with whatever they wanted. I'd give them keys to the space, the login to our website, everything. But the whole idea is to actually give them power over the institutions. And specifically give that freedom to artists whose work is addressing precarity. Precarity itself became the hinge for the entire project. The Lab came from this precarious space, but the point wasn't to stabilize the institution, the point was to allow the artists to address their own situations of precarity with their work, and to give them power via the institution, to value them from the outset. So, by empowering the artists we could kind of empower the art. One crucial part of the experiment is that the artists can dictate my role within the space. They can say: "We prefer you not to come in in the next two months"—it is very loose. And so far, we've done eight artists commissions of \$25,000-\$100,000 each, and in total we have given around half a million dollars away. It has become such a miracle.

RK / PG: This is very inspiring! If we now look at the centre-periphery topic, what is your view? From our perspective, we are assuming that this statement

might resonate with your work—that there’s a relationship between the two. What are your thoughts?



Dora García, *The Hearing Voices Lab*, November 22–December 4, 2016; courtesy of The Lab, San Francisco.

DB: It’s a huge topic obviously, and it becomes yet another platitude or catch phrase the art world is constantly using. You have these shifts where suddenly everybody is talking about one thing. Yet, this is one of those big topics that will constantly be a part of conversations about art, and understandably so. When you think of the centre, you think of the status quo, what’s acceptable behaviour, and many of us think of art made by white men in a specific European or New York setting. We understand what the centre is.

So, the margins and the periphery... I think it is Charles Gaines (American Artist- RK) who has a beautiful treatise against the use of the word “marginality.”¹ And even this word periphery, we are referring to colonialism, and so on. It is used reductively, and it limits the singularity of the work of artists who are often corralled together by people wielding this kind of language.

But at the same time what we are interested in are people who can challenge our own status quo. Who can really force us to re-see the world and re-sense it, and to dismantle the systems of perceptions that have sort of forced us into a habituated way of seeing, a form of being in the world. And so what you want is other voices and other perspectives to jolt you out of that comfort zone, if you are in fact in the centre. Or if you just risk becoming habituated to your certain ways of seeing. Even if you don’t consider yourself central, and you consider yourself somewhere on the margins, we all still have habituated ways of seeing. So, it’s really about jolting yourself out of that centre—that sensory perspective. The problem with it, and this is something that never gets addressed well enough, is that it’s really difficult to get jolted out of your habituated forms of seeing. It’s painful, it’s hard, it’s deeply challenging. It requires some hard conversations with people, it requires being *disturbed*. You have to be willing to see the horror within your own self: “Oh my god, I can’t believe I have been seeing it this way.” It involves self-critique. It’s like a little kid trying to navigate the streets of New York City. It’s scary, and it’s painful, and that’s

why it's really important. And I think that's what the power of art is: it allows us to have a safe space where we can have that experience. It's a difficult and painful experience, but if you really invest in it, it gives you the space to dismantle the thoughtless habits that have formed your way of living and being in the world. So, when I think of centre and periphery, I think of everything that we don't see. All the unknown factors that go into our being in the world that we are just not aware of, that we are not attuned to. That we kind of blocked off with blinders. The whole point of art is to take away the blinders.

RK / PG: You are referring to “we.” To whom are you referring? We, as centre? Can it go both ways?

DB: With “we” I mean every single human being. The one thing I would say is that we all have singular ways we move through the world that are very unique to our own specific condition. Even if we have all grown up in the same context, we might have similar experiences but we are still not the same. I cannot have a perfect sympathetic understanding of the way you see the world; that is just impossible. Because you are different than me. This singularity means that every time we need a jolt, it's our own singular jolt, our own throwing of our self outside of our own centre, from our own comfortable, habituated sense of being in the world. Different art will do it differently to different people, but I think that is what's wonderful about it, that it's always singular. It never makes *common* sense.

RK / PG: Do artists and curators also have a place in that? Because they are also going through a transformation throughout the creative process.

DB: The artist is the first person that is challenged. And that's why it is such a complicated relationship between the artist, the curator, and the audience. Because the artist is the one that is first impacted, and they are often deeply impacted by the work they create. There's the artist's initial intention, they create a scope for an artwork to come into being, and then they actually settle into the making of the artwork. And what inevitably happens in that making is that the form itself will always kind of “bite back” and refuse the artist's keen sense of total satisfaction of creating the thing that they envisioned. The form refuses to be well-formed by the artist's hands, or the artist's ideas. So language, technical practice, things like that, they don't perfectly form the artwork that was intended by the artist. There are always a few moments in the process of the making, if the artists is well attuned to that struggle or that kind of challenge, that they allow the form to change and become something else. It's like seeing the difference between somebody who is technically perfect in their craft, who has created a technically perfect thing, but who has no artistry. It's not actually an art form, because it doesn't challenge form itself. Or, in other words, the form itself is very easily knowable. So I think the artist is the first person to be challenged by the process.

And the curator has to be in a sense the first audience for the work. So, they have to identify or be able to see or talk through that challenge, that pain, that singular weirdness from their own perspective. The curator needs to reify the work in public space where other people will be able to actually *see* that unformed thing. And that is also a very hard process.

RK / PG: How do you choose your artists? What are the criteria to give voice to the underrepresented, a term you use on The Lab's mission statement?



Light Field Film Festival, November 11-12, 2016; courtesy of The Lab, San Francisco.

DB: It's interesting how much my process was changed by The Lab. The process of making The Lab itself has completely and utterly changed my way of working with artists and my way of understanding art itself—in a good way. I started with a rather “art world” perspective—which is basically working with artists who confounded and who challenged me, but who were confounding in a very acceptable way. I was working with artists like Lutz Bacher, Anna Halprin, Dora Garcia. These are very interesting artists who challenge the status quo in their own way, their work is difficult to articulate in a very interesting way to me, but their work is also acceptable in the proper “art world.” What I have become more interested in at The Lab was figuring out how the unacceptability of certain practices and the confounding, challenging, and inarticulable could come together. And to figure out why certain kinds of artists' bodies and work was so difficult to bring into these conversations. And also, the very basic tenet of being able to address their material conditions. Being able to say: you, as a body, you have not been paid and have not been given value for the work that you do. I find your work very interesting and challenging, and it may completely disrupt and change the way I work and the way I am able to be in the world, but heck, that's the point.

I've started thinking about precarity as being something that can be powerful, and to try to integrate that wholly into the practice of The Lab. Addressing the material conditions of artists is a way of addressing art itself.

RK/PG: What did you actually find out, when researching that underrepresented art? What about it inspired you?

DB: It brings me a tremendous amount of joy. These are the really radical art practices, the ones that deal with the unnameable, irrecoverable parts of our existence. One thing that is really fascinating is that so many artists that I work with create

spaces for other artists. When given the means, the space, the opportunity, their entire practice is really about opening space up for each other. They explore forms of authorship that are almost improvisational. Each has their own flow and style, and they work with communities and groups where they are willing to share a lot of the credit. They are creating the spaces they need to have in order to live meaningful lives. Jacqueline Gordon created this movable wall system within The Lab that could be adjusted by dancers, improvisational artists, theatre groups. And she specifically wanted The Lab to be open from 8pm to 2am. During these odd hours, these after-work moments of liberation, where all of a sudden at 1am a group of 40 people would flood into The Lab and would work almost completely intuitively within the space. Creating music, doing dances. They were very much coming from improvisational practices, they are technically skilled and have a lot of work to offer, but mostly they were there to be with each other. I am very interested in opening up *that* kind of space. Those moments of liberation are fleeting, but they are divine.



Akio Suzuki and Aki Onda, *ke i te ki*, September 16, 2015; courtesy of The Lab, San Francisco.

RK / PG: The political situation in the US—how do you see the political arena?

DB: It's terrifying. I see myself as an anarchist, ethically, but I have to do a fair amount of political work in The Lab just to be able to maintain our space. I talk to the mayor and to the Board of Supervisors, and I have to play a role that I have never ever had to play before, especially considering that I'm usually an activist in the streets. I'm usually getting arrested for these types of things. When you're in this position, you are dealing with so many ideas and subjectivities and bodies being put on the front line that I think it's way more interesting for me in my position as a white woman controlling this big space in downtown San Francisco to actually try to put my body on the line in a way that is sometimes risky and complicated and hard. I don't know if I'm successful, but I'll keep trying until June 2020.

I did something recently where we created a document listing basically every cooperatively, communistically run resource in the entire Bay Area, and it's over thirty-five pages long. The idea that there are health services for people who need it, there are food banks and community owned gardens, there are cooperatively run day

cares. There's actually an entire separate economy of cooperatively run resources that we all use but that we just don't acknowledge as much as we should. This Bay Area Commonwealth document attempts to list all of these resources. If you're an immigrant coming in from out of town, here are all the resources you can get for free translation (if you need health care you need a translator), here is a public library that will offer you resources in your own language, here are various other sources of wealth that are not those in the traditional economy.

But I also have to acknowledge that the US was founded as a slave state, and the economy was always contingent upon that scenario. It was founded through genocide and it was founded by slave holders, and I think we constantly return to that horror simply because the foundations of this government itself were created on that material reality; those are the building blocks holding the whole system up. So, unless we want to completely change and rethink the economy and rethink the way that the State itself was built, we're not going to have a democracy, ever. For me, it's not *if* but *when*, when it comes to the dismantling of the State. All I'm doing is trying to prepare people so that we're not scared. So that we understand that we already have all the resources that we need to take care of each other and that we're not so dependent on institutional resources. We are doing a lot of things in the Bay Area to hold to each other; we're building housing, we're building kitchens, we have tent share resources, we have different initiatives going on to begin checking in with each other. It doesn't mean that the violence won't be horrible and awful especially with eco-disasters and things like that compounding the problem, but I do feel like we're preparing ourselves or at least we are trying to do that work.

RK / PG: You are leaving The Lab in 2020. What are your next steps?

DB: I appreciate the European model of having contractual limits on terms, and I think it's very true with curators. Your imagination can only work with a finite amount of resources, and there's only so much I can conjure up with my wits alone. We resuscitated the space of The Lab, we stabilized it, and now I want to give it over to somebody in the city who has been displaced or a person from the outside who has dealt with the same kind of issues of displacement and the same economic problems San Francisco has.

RK / PG: What is the fine line between being a curator and being politically active?

DB: This cracks me up because you have these big institutions and they have their "political" statements, and they have a bunch of artists that illustrate a statement in various ways. For me, that's completely disempowering because it is trying to govern not only our experience of the work itself, but these political art shows are also essentially trying to govern our experience of the world. I think the experience of art is about un-governing, releasing our bodies in a state of total ambiguity, the confounding unknowability of things. The process of un-governing bodies is very important to the curatorial process. How do we create a space so that when you enter you don't feel bound by a certain way of seeing or by a rule book—this is scary. But actually it's really easy. If I just follow the lead of artists who have never experienced the kind of privilege that I have, of having a sense of knowing every time I walk into an art space of what to do and how to be. If you follow the lead of artists who have had to figure out other ways of navigating the world, they will help you un-govern your own ways of seeing. Artists all have various ways of tricking the imagination into

perceiving another kind of space. When it works, it really is like stepping into a spaceship or a time capsule when you step into a good art exhibition or a good performance or program. You have no idea where you are, what's happening, what's going on. It's that very confounding sense of being lost and of not knowing where you are and being ungoverned. It is kind of a migrant sensibility, but it is also a sense of lacking solid ground. When done well, it can be both liberating and empowering for audiences.

Notes

I Charles Gaines, *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, (Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, 1993).

Dena Beard is the Executive Director of The Lab in San Francisco. She received her M.A. in Art History, Theory, and Criticism from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and was previously Assistant Curator at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Beard has organized projects with Lutz Bacher, Sadie Barnette, Ellen Fullman, Dora García, Jacqueline Gordon, Anna Halprin, Constance Hockaday, Fritzia Irizar, Norma Jeane, Claudia La Rocco, Annea Lockwood, Barry McGee, Silke Otto-Knapp, Brontez Purnell, The Red Krayola, Las Sucas, Wadada Leo Smith, Xara Thustra, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul.

Ronny Koren is a MAS Curating student at ZHdK, based in Zurich. Her background consists of projects in the art world and in the tech landscape, where she worked for Google for 4 years. Her current research focuses on the fluctuations of the term 'contemporary art' in philosophy of art discourse. She holds a BA in East Asian studies and Art History from Tel Aviv University.

Paola Granati holds a BA in Political Science, a Post Graduate in HR Mgmt, and a Masters in Music Business & Songwriting. She is now finalizing her CAS Program in Curatorship to further broaden her creative and artistic interests. In between studies, Paola is an executive HR Leader focused on organisational cultures, leadership, skills development and coaching.

Interview with Montecristo Project

Domenico Ermanno Roberti

Montecristo Project is an exhibition space in an undisclosed and deserted island along the Sardinian coast. Founded in 2016 by Enrico Piras and Alessandro Sau, it has hosted solo shows by Salvatore Moro, Tonino Casula, and Lorenzo Oggiano, and in August 2018 it presented a collective exhibition titled *ISLAND* featuring the works of Carlos Fernández-Pello, Karlos Gil, Alfredo Rodriguez and Alessandro Vizzini. The island is remote, and the exhibitions are only physically accessible to the invited artists. Photographic and written essays are available on: <http://montecristoproject.tumblr.com/> and other social media platforms.

Domenico Ermanno Roberti: How did you decide to start this project, and how important was the choice of the location in relation to the programme?

Montecristo Project: The Montecristo Project didn't come out of the blue, rather it evolved out of a previous work called *Occhio Riflesso*. This earlier project consisted of a series of six exhibitions in which we installed our own works in unique and peculiar locations around Sardinia—for instance, an artificial cave, otherwise known as a *Domus de Janas* (an archaeological tomb). Locations were chosen to be “work-specific”—reversing the idea of site-specific and thus using the space so as to enhance and respond to our pieces. We had no public presentations, and the installations—including the materials that were used to display the works, such as lights and electric generators—lasted only one day. We who installed the works were the only viewers. Everything was then spread by the photographic documentation we created. All of these are elements that we kept for the Montecristo Project. What has changed is that now we invite other artists to exhibit, and we take the role of constructing the spaces, either conceptually or aesthetically, and then we document every project with photographs, which we integrate as works into our own practices.

The idea of locating our space on a deserted and secret island came in 2016 when considering what space should host the first artist we decided to present: Salvatore Moro (1933-2007). Our need to carefully control the framing, presentation, and discursive contextualisation of our work brought us to a further radical exploration of the idea of the artwork existing autonomously, despite its public legitimation, as being located “elsewhere,” outside time and space. Salvatore Moro's work is very peculiar, weird and borderline; it is rooted in Sardinian archaic imagery. We wanted to keep its ahistorical, anti-classical barbarian spirit by creating a white cube in this sacred space, somewhere nobody could ever reach: a deserted island out at sea.

We tend to conceive the need for expression of someone like Moro, and other artists we appreciate, as something coming before Art as a conscious category; primitive or Egyptian art had an autonomous being, they existed for a purpose which was not necessarily always that of being seen. That makes our idea something very ancient rather than new and subversive.

DER: In *Pictures and Tears*, the author James Elkins collects stories of the emotional responses of the public when experiencing artworks. At the same



Montecristo Project island, Mediterranean sea, Sardinia

time, curator Henry Urbach in a poetic article published on Log20 defines the need for exhibitions where the content is not present but only told through other elements to have an atmosphere. How does your curatorial practice address the physical distance between the original object and the viewer and the impossibility for the atmosphere of an exhibition to be experienced, other than through your documentation?

MP: It is very interesting to experience a work of art through the filter of someone else's memories and impressions. This secondary lens creates manipulations that might deliberately or otherwise lead to misreadings that, had one been able to experience the artwork directly, never would have arisen.

Thus, beginning from the last question, we would say that our narrative filter (an attempt to mediate content through text and images), which applies to everything regarding the project, is fundamentally about creating the atmosphere of it. This applies to everything from the island being kept secret, to the fact that it is only accessible through the imagery that we created.

Absence is a key concept for us, and it is something recurrent also in architectural-spatial concerns. Consider, for instance, the iconostasis in early churches as a physical and ideological structure to separate the liturgy from the public, the sacred from its becoming seen. This affirms the idea of the mystery that surrounds revelation.

Displacing this idea into a contemporary art system is a delicate topic, since the gathering of fragments, and the conceiving of an exhibition which is made of things

that are not there, is something we believe is part of an artistic, rather than curatorial, strategy. The boundaries between these roles are now more permeable than ever, but isn't it the curator's task to arrange the visibility or lack thereof of the artworks? There is this famous letter that Robert Morris wrote to Harald Szeemann to withdraw his works from *documenta V*, as he indicates that the roles of artist and curator were taking on an unpleasant dynamic from his perspective. Morris asked not to be manipulated, not wanting his work to become illustrative of somebody else's discourse. We think that our need to create and keep control of the frame, and the way that everyone accesses the work, responds to this need to refrain from being absorbed into a larger curatorial discourse. Naturally, this coincides with a partial withdrawal from the public, as we shift to the role of mediators. We treated the island as our own iconostasis in order to better allow the work to live in its own dimension.

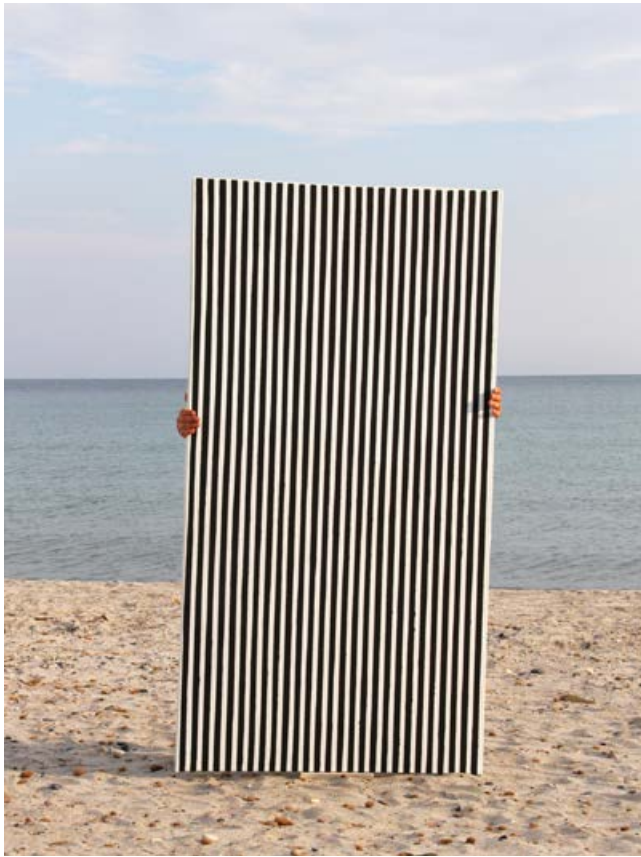
DER: When reading Kant's "Was ist Aufklärung?", Michel Foucault highlights the notion of *Publikum*, where the author makes himself a conductor of the meaning of his times and uses writing as an institutional tool to establish a connection between writer and reader. Who is your *Publikum* (audience), how do you position yourself towards them, and what instruments do you use to send your messages?

MP: This one is a very delicate question because, as we said, we have no direct public, and it is therefore not possible for us to point at an actual audience. In fact, it is important to us to specify that we do not work for the public, but for ourselves. What this implies is that there is a risk that every project we do could pass by totally unnoticed. In this sense, every time we publish a new project or exhibition it is like throwing a stone into a pond. Concerning the Foucauldian interpretation of the role Kant took as a communicator to reach a wide audience (still made highly up of specialised academic readers), we try to address, from our peripheral position, some themes we feel are crucial in the sphere of a contemporary debate: the role of artist-curators, as well as matters of colonisation and resistance. However, we look to address them from an oblique perspective and to take examples from Sardinia specifically—its history, art, and culture.

The instruments we use to spread our work (we either realise exhibitions, write texts, or create hybrid projects such as our last guide-tour of Sardinia) are social media, and more broadly the Internet. Over time, we have established a series of connections and collaborations that constitute a public of sorts. So, probably this highly specific audience, made up of curatorial and artistic entities with whom we are in dialogue, constitutes our main audience.

DER: You have chosen to use the camera as the single instrument which visually communicates the experience of the artworks you present. How do you feel about your viewers being recipients of a single interpretation and framing—yours—of the artist's work? And what is the artist's response?

MP: Our choice of spreading the exhibition's through their photographic documentation was at first the only way we had to leave a trace of our *Occhio Riflesso* exhibitions. It all emerged from an attempt to establish a simple yet radical relation to our works and their existence, to refuse traditional ideas of presentation, space, curatorial supervision, and public. At this stage, taking pictures to document the relation between the works and the space was just a necessity. However, in the process of working to create these images, we started to understand the importance of docu-



Models of display (our most beloved techno-archaic artist) Tonino Casula at Montecristo Project, 2016, curated and documented by Enrico Piras and Alessandro Sau

mentation as a work of art itself. We started to consciously operate with the camera by those implicit canons that are present in all conventional gallery and museum documentation, but conceiving of those photographs as highly complementary to the artworks. To answer your question: we made this so as to propose our own framing of the works, instead of them simply being a part of a curatorial document. That is precisely what we wanted to avoid, because we felt it was misleading, and weakened the pieces themselves.

Until now, every artist we have collaborated with has been very happy with this approach. Our documentation and their works become a single thing—an artistic collaboration—that we establish with all the invited artists, that works alongside the experience of the solitary shows on the island.

At the moment we are conceiving several new experiences that are accessible to the public, in particular a new work which includes the visit to a series of monuments and sculptures that are part of our latest research: “A guided-tour of the Sardinian archaic, weird and marvellous stone sculpture—La Costante Resistenziale.”

DER: Photographs Not Taken is a series of essays from photographers describing an image they did not manage to freeze through their lenses. Do you ever feel your exhibitions could have been told, written, or photographed differently and, in your view, would an outsider’s eye have worked to build a different narrative?



Carlos Fernandez-Pello, *A futile attempt at creating cult objects*, 2018, courtesy of Garcia Galeria, stoffa, gommapiuma, 31 x 22 x 40 cm

MP: This is something we have been reflecting on since the very beginning of the project. The answer is yes: we think everything could have been done in many ways different than our own. One thing we would love is to have different artists documenting our island, or creating an exhibition with the existing photographs that would then be narrated in their own way, but it's something we still need to keep working on. Three years ago, we hosted our Madrid-based artist friend Carlos Fernández-Pello who took video footage of Occhio Riflesso's locations. Sadly, the material he shot got lost when he later went to Antarctica for a new research project. Although everything was gone, it disappeared in a very fascinating way, in a faraway and unreachable land not unlike our own island.

Enrico Piras (b. 1987, Cagliari) and **Alessandro Sau** (b. 1981, Cagliari) are two visual artists and curators. They started collaborating in 2013 with a project called Occhio Riflesso, and in 2016 they founded Montecristo Project, an artistic and curatorial office and exhibition space located on a deserted island along the Sardinian coast.

Domenico Ermanno Roberti is an architect and curator based in Zürich. His recent research focuses on the links between architecture and gender studies, more specifically the significance of the role played by the manipulation of space in the creation of normalised identities of gender. He holds a MSc in Architecture from the Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, Switzerland and he is currently a postgraduate student in Curating at the Zürich University of the Arts.

“Who No Know, Go Know”: How to Shift Knowledge about/of Africa Interview with Stacy Hardy – Chimurenga Magazine Gozde Filinta

Founded by Ntone Edjabe in 2002, Chimurenga (a Shona word that loosely translates as “struggle for freedom”) is at the centre of vibrant new cultural projection across Africa, which includes championing new music, literature, and visual arts. Drawing together myriad voices from across Africa and the diaspora, Chimurenga takes many forms operating as an innovative platform for free ideas and political reflection about Africa by Africans. Outputs include a journal of culture, art, and politics of the same name, a quarterly broadsheet called *The Chronic*, The Chimurenga Library—an online resource of collected independent pan-African periodicals and personal books, and the Pan African Space Station (PASS)—, an online music radio station, and a pop-up studio. The projects are meant “not just to produce new knowledge, but rather to express the intensities of our world, to capture those forces and to take action,” and collectively they have started conversations about African cultures, including the rewriting of the continent’s history, the role technology plays in its future, and its music scene. Their motto has been “Who No Know Go Know”—the ones who do not know will know.

Chimurenga is reviewed by newspapers and magazines, and it is presented in conferences, events, and exhibitions. In 2007, it was part of the documenta magazine project within the documenta exhibition in Kassel; in 2008 it was reviewed by an article in *The New York Times*.¹ Its director Ntone Edjabe also spoke about its approach during numerous interviews and conferences at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Art Academy in Berlin in 2005, at the Dakar Biennale in 2006, and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2009. In particular, the capacity of Chimurenga to influence ideas and writing and its role as an innovative educational model is recognised by initiatives such as *Meanwhile in Africa...* in 2005, and *Learning Machines: Art Education and Alternative Production of Knowledge* in 2010. In

2010, Chimurenga began a collaboration with the magazine *Glänta* to translate *Chimurenga* into Swedish.

Gozde Filinta: What is your role within Chimurenga?

Stacy Hardy: I’m an editor and a researcher. I’ve been working with Chimurenga for the past fifteen years, and I’m still working. Most of our participants are around the world, and we work globally. While there is a base in Cape Town, we operate anywhere.

GF: How did you choose the location of your base, in Pan-African Market, Cape Town? Was it a conscious choice?

SH: We are a Pan-African organisation with various contributors all around the world, and we don’t see ourselves as South African. We see ourselves as a global Pan-African network, and our office is in Cape Town.

Our first and longest office was in the Pan-African Market. The decision to place ourselves in a market, within Cape Town, an area which has always been very resistant to outsiders and others, was a conscious decision. Being placed within a market, as a space of sale, space of people, and in some ways being distant from the art world, galleries, and office spaces was again an intentional choice. The market space, in traditional African culture, is always seen as the centre of everything. Generally, in African cities, the market is recognised as the centre, so locating within a market was embracing of that and locating ourselves in what we see as the centre in Cape Town.

GF: How did being in the Pan-African Market influenced Chimurenga?

SH: Since the beginning, there has always been a daily relationship. Coming into the office through the Market gave the feeling of excitement, freedom, and also comfort. Nevertheless, the ideology of the project was set out aside from the Market.

The founder of the project, Ntone, is Cameroonian by origin, and he found himself in Cape Town, just like rest of the editors who are from other parts of the African continent. So, the ideology and the ideas were born within the project and Chimurenga became a Pan-African project. While the location fit that spirit, I don't think it changed it. It just fit what was already a vision.

GF: Has gentrification played a role in your project?

SH: Yes, unfortunately there is an ongoing gentrification in Cape Town, and we have been affected by it. After a legal battle and attempts to prevent it, the building of the Pan-African market, after its twenty years of existence, was sold, and Chimurenga was forced to move as well. So, now we have a new space in a new area, out of the Pan-African market.

GF: What motivated the project initially? What is it that you want to change?

SH: The Chimurenga was born out of an ideology as seeing politics as firmly embedded in culture and the refusal of separating politics and culture. The name of the organisation, “Chimurenga,” is a Shona word, which means “liberation,” and it gives a clue about our ideology: try to fight for a free and better world, along with ideas and imagination.

I think all of us in Chimurenga think that in the contemporary world, what is primarily under attack is the imagination. There is an urgent struggle to be done on that level. Stating and pointing out that what we have is imagination and innovation. If we look at Africa, it is one of the great spaces of great innovation and imagination, on a daily level. The act of survival becomes an act of imagination and innovation. So, we often think of innovation as something as creating great technology, but really in Africa it is how you look and how you survive in conditions that are in many cases unliveable.

That leads to questions of “How can we find ways to rethink and re-understand the imagination and innovation?” and “How can we unite and draw what we already know in Africa and take that information seriously as knowledge?”



Chimurenga Library at the San Francisco Main Library, 2014. Photo: Andria Lo. Courtesy Chimurenga.

GF: How do you position yourself to be visible and accessible?

SH: Chimurenga is a platform that curates and produces multiple projects. So, we put out a Pan-African newspaper that comes out quarterly, called the *Chronic*, and we distribute to at least all centres in Africa, and we do issues in other languages and distribute it around the world, including Europe and the US. We also run the Pan-African Space Station, an online radio station that operates 24/7, open to anyone and always streaming. In this Pan-African Space Station, we try to take music as a serious knowledge. We also regularly hold live events in various venues around the world as we attend talks and discussions, both globally and on the continent. We also bring publications of books and magazines. We produce online content to be accessible online, on our website.

GF: How has the community responded to your project, and how has it shifted over the years?

SH: Chimurenga is a community itself. We are our readers, our listeners, and our viewers. It's a community built on friendship and a shared belief in the practice of the black radical tradition, as it supports, inspires, and extends contemporary social and political thought along with aesthetic critique. Inevitably, it is always changing and moving, as our lives change and move, too.

Since we really work on multiple levels globally, our community has always been and still is global. I think, like in our current era, centres and peripheries, senses of “where is where” are getting blurry, as our community is growing in Europe, America, and the continent.

GF: What kind of questions are you aiming to find answers to through Chimurenga?

SH: Our questions and concerns are more around the Global Pan-African Network and questions around Pan-Africanism itself. Some of our main questions are: *How do we learn to know what we know? How can we draw from disparate and often intersecting practices*



The Chimurenga Library, The Showroom, London, 2015. Photo: Daniel Brooke. Courtesy Chimurenga.

through which we stylise our conduct and daily life on the continent? How do we harness the inventiveness, the generative resilience, and the agility with which we live?

GF: Where do you see Chimurenga on the spectrum between centre and periphery?

SH: The centre and periphery depends on where you are standing, but it's also necessarily as an artificial construct. Fela Kuti is Africa's biggest artist, but he lived his life within radical counter-strategies that resist colonialism's ongoing domination and attend to entanglement, the blurring of borders, and other practices that trouble notions of centre and periphery, self-determination, and sovereignty. Chimurenga is not interested in centres and peripheries, but rather in how to forge communities, production, and circulation of knowledge and its operation in border zones between informal and formal, licit and illicit, or chaotic and ordered.

GF: You have four bases on the African Continent: Nairobi, Lagos, Johannesburg, and Cape Town. By owning more than one space, would you consider yourself one of the cultural centres in Africa?

SH: I think we'd disagree with the notion of “cultural centres.” For Chimurenga, Kinshasa, Kisangani, Joburg, Maputo, Harare, Luanda as well as Paris, New York, Mexico City, and Palermo are all cultural bases, all of which Chimurenga works with and from. Lagos is a world cultural capital, Cape Town is a European cultural capital, and we exist in it as an ongoing state of resistance.

GF: How have cultural differences within the collaboration with writers, researchers, artists, and other publishers played a role in shaping the project?

SH: Collaboration, as “*encounter, ensemble, improvisation, and the invocation of the knowledge of freedom*,”² is both a method and an ideology behind Chimurenga. So, yes, the project is defined by the self-organised ensemble of social life that is launched every day across the continent.

GF: “Who no know, go know.” How does this saying relate to your project?

SH: It means, “If you don't know... go find out.” It raises some of the fundamental questions of our pro-

ject, such as: “The knowledge is there but how do we know what we know?”; “How do we embrace knowledge not as information but as a methodology – a way of learning that expresses the conditions of our lives, our very existence?”; “How do we shift knowledge about/of Africa, from ‘What it should be’ to ‘What we imagine it to be?’”; and “How do we make visible what is emerging or re-emerging across the continent?”

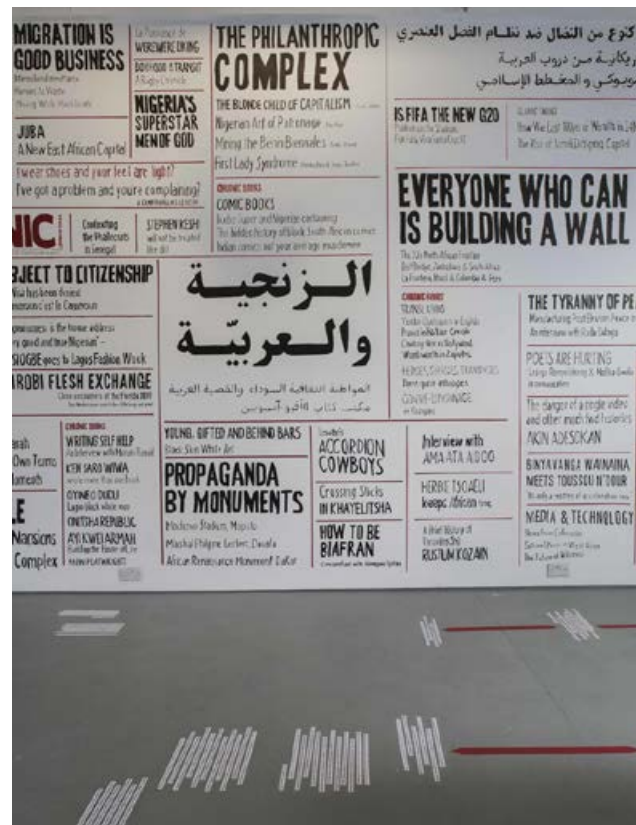
GF: How is the project funded?

SH: Chimurenga receives more global funding than that from the local government. This is also about Chimurenga's position: it operates outside the boundaries and borders of state and national government.

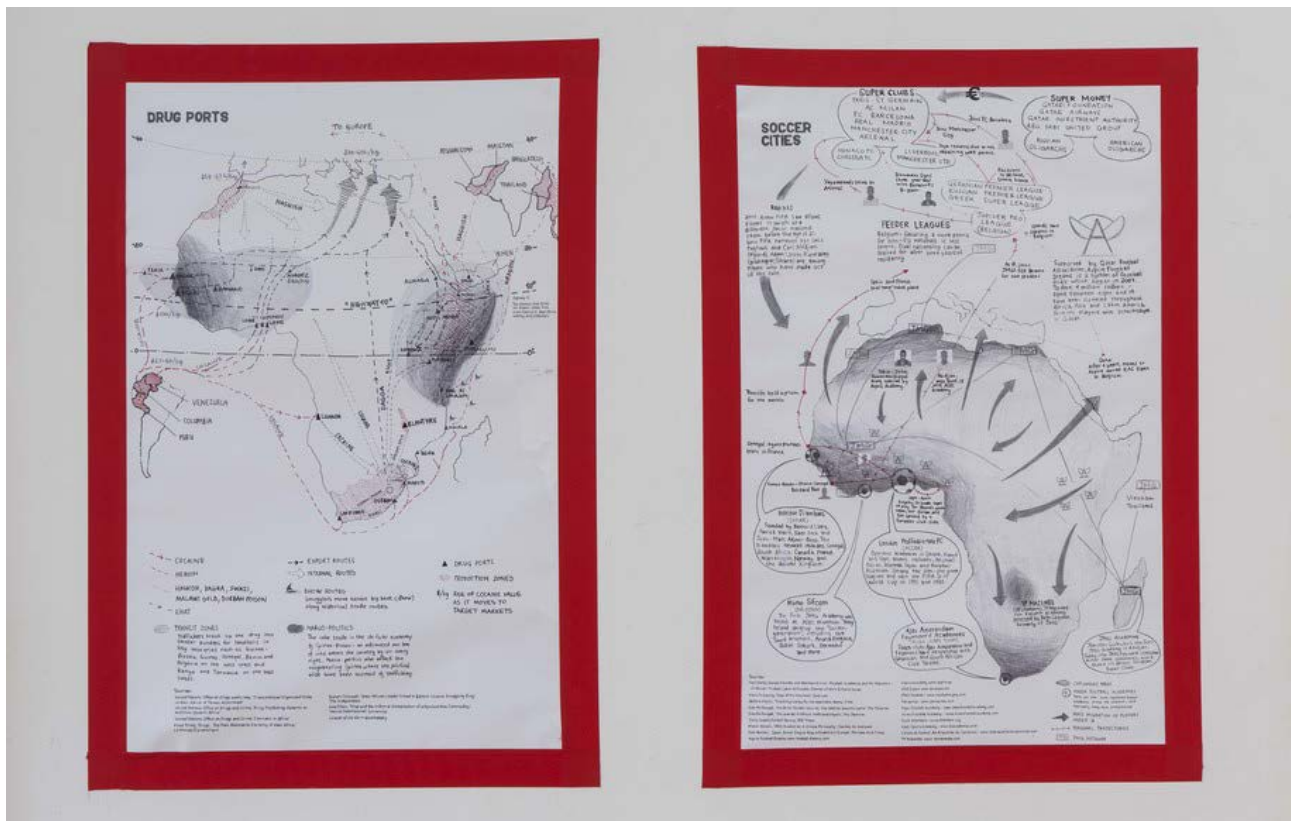
Notes

1 Rachel Donadio, *The Empire Writes Back*, *The New York Times*, Jul. 7, 2008.

2 Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of The Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).



The Chimurenga Library installation view, The Showroom, London, 2015. Photo: Daniel Brooke. Courtesy Chimurenga.



The Chimurenga Library installation view, The Showroom, London, 2015. Photo: Daniel Brooke. Courtesy Chimurenga.

Stacy Hardy is a writer, teacher and researcher working between Egypt and South Africa. Since 2008 she has worked as a researcher, editor and finally Associate Editor at the pan-African journal Chimurenga. Her writing has appeared in a wide range of publications, including Pocko Times (UK), Ctheory (Canada), Bengal Lights (Bangladesh), Black Warrior Review (USA), Evergreen Review (USA), Drunken Boat (USA), Joyland (USA), Black Sun Lit (USA), New Orleans Review (USA) and of course Chimurenga. Several of her short stories have been published in books, literary anthologies, monographs and catalogues and a collection of her short fiction, *Because the Night* was published by Pocko Books, London in 2015. She is involved in the production of an ongoing series of multimedia works in collaboration with Angolan composer, performer and instrument designer Victor Gama, and is currently working on an experimental performance piece, titled *Museum of Lungs* together with Egyptian director Laila Soliman as well as musicians Neo Muyanga (SA) and Nancy Mounir (Egypt).

Gozde Filinta is a curator based in Zurich. She has taken part in various art projects since 2012, including *The Moving Museum* 2014 and *Yama Istanbul* 2016. Between 2017 and 2018 she worked as a program assistant at SALT, Istanbul and as the Project Management at OJ Art Space, Istanbul. Currently, a MAS program student, in Curating at ZHdK and Gozde is working on several independent projects in Zurich. She is interested in urgent global issues, planetary problems, and researches on Post-Anthropocene.

Encounter with Finnish Artist and Curator Ritva Kovalainen

Jan Sandberg

I met Ritva Kovalainen, the curator of Festival Norpas, in her atelier outside Kimito, Finland, in November 2018, to gain insight into the challenges of organising a multi-art festival in and for a working-class community. Norpas describes itself as “[...] made of concerts, silent films accompanied by live music, workshops, installations, photo and art exhibitions, interviews and lectures with artists, dance, performance art, theatre, circus—all these colliding in unexpected ways.”

In conducting this interview, I was hoping to get the opportunity to ask about the process leading up to the foundation of the festival in 2012. It happened to be at the moment when the residents of Dalsbruk, where the Festival Norpas is established, woke up to the devastating news of the sudden bankruptcy of the steel mill FN-Steel¹—the main employer in the region. Did Festival Norpas, despite the difficult conditions prevailing in the community at the time of its inauguration, manage nonetheless to install a sense of hope for the future? The festival, a self-proclaimed odd-bird and peripheral landmark in the Finnish art world, is currently in its eighth edition and seems to have no plans of slowing down.

Jan Sandberg: I would like to start by asking about the history of the Festival Norpas. How did it start? It would also be interesting to hear about the team behind it. You are acting as the curator, but there are additional members behind the organisation of the festival?

Ritva Kovalainen: Festival Norpas was founded by Matias Kauppi and me. Matias was an organiser of the event’s predecessor, the Festival Surpas² in Spain. Festival Surpas was located in a small town called Portbou; the festival came to an end because of financial difficulties. So, I lived here, and he lived in Barcelona, and we started to form the idea that maybe Dalsbruk could be a good location for a continuation of the festival in some form or other. It seemed to be an attractive alternative, as opposed to doing it in a larger city—that was something we had no interest in pursuing. Large cities already have a plethora of activi-

ties and festivals—we figured that here we have the chance to do something more intimate, more in line with our interests, and through our own network maybe bring forth what could be an artistic experience—in both the width and depth of a festival. As things grew, so did we in size—Ville Laitinen joined us as executive manager a couple of years later. We now have approximately one hundred volunteers for the festival; in the latter years, we even managed to pay salaries for the managers.

JS: Ok, so there is a direct continuation of the Festival Surpas and Festival Norpas in Finland?



Ritva Kovalainen and guest Oriol Hernando (ES). Dalsbruk, 2016. Courtesy of Festival Norpas



Artistic manager Matias Kauppi Festival Norpas, Dalsbruk, 2016.
Courtesy of Festival Norpas

RK: Yes, I displayed a selection of my works at the Surpas Festival. I was asked to join by Matias. He was there bridging Finnish and Spanish culture—networking, so to say. We became better acquainted during my exhibition there, so this is where we share the Festival Surpas connection. In our opinion, it was an extraordinary festival, and it was the spark that ignited the future formation of the Festival Norpas—it all came from that place after Festival Surpas went bankrupt.

JS: How did the closing of the steel mill in Dalsbruk affect the formation of the festival—or did it influence its formation at all? It all happened the year of its formation, if memory serves me.

RK: The closing of the steel mill did actually happen sometime before the founding of Festival Norpas, but it didn't affect, or contribute directly, to our activities. For example, all our events were either in spaces that were assigned specifically to cultural activities or were already empty buildings before the closing. But, of course, the closing of the steel mill was a very tragic

event, and the local communities were affected. It was indeed tragic. Questions that did arise during that time centred on what could possibly be done to regain positive thinking again and reintroduce a belief in the future even if the situation was precarious. Focusing on tourism and culture was in part seen as a solution to this problem.

JS: We have been focusing on what constitutes community in our course at the ZHdK Curation department. How has Festival Norpas been received on the local level?

RK: It was slow in the first years. This Festival Norpas and its organisers are considered to be somewhat odd birds here in this region. We, the organisers, are mainly people who moved here. I mean, I lived here for over twenty years—but this doesn't make the festival "local" to local residents here. Dalsbruk is its own community where we are simply acting as organisers. Over the years, the prejudice has, of course, slowly fizzled away. They see we bring people—customers for businesses, restaurants, accommodations. What's more, we offer an event, and everything that goes along with that, so the municipality considers it good PR for them, something that brings them out into the world. So, I'd say we achieved [a community] in some sense, insofar as the community recognises that there is something positive here, and that we can cooperate with the local actors in a positive way. Among the local residents, we have certain people interested in art who participate actively—but we also have those who do not have slightest interest at all in art or culture, or those who have their own set of beliefs or fixation on tradition. Connecting with these groups is more difficult. We have tried each year to present a project where we could do something together, or just something for the sake of the community. We have tried to reach out.

JS: So there is a conscious strategy to include groups in the festival?

RK: Yes, definitely. For example, one year we had this art workshop for the local women of Dalsbruk with over twenty people attending. After the workshop ended, the group stayed together; they still gather as a group, and over the years have contributed their works to Festival Norpas. We also had a project, a collaboration with the elderly residents—people over eighty in on Kimito Island. In was documentation through interviews and photography of their lives. The final



Ayaa Sheik Jalal and artwork *I Love Aleppo* Women's Workshop Kimito Island (VaSaMu). Dalsbruk, 2016. Courtesy of Festival Norpas



Kirsi-Marja Sirén, *Humble Luck*. Part of exhibition. Dalsbruk, 2017. Photo: Anna Kuokkanen. Courtesy of Festival Norpas



Jouko Ollikainen *Reconnection* at Festival Norpas. Dalsbruk, 2014. Photo: Niilo Rinne. Courtesy of Festival Norpas



Screening of *Forest Talk* film. Dalsbruk, 2016. Courtesy of Festival Norpas

result was presented as an exhibition and book publication. It was received positively in the community.

JS: On the topic of centre vs. periphery, how do you relate to a possible existence on the periphery outside of a perceived centre? For example, when it comes to institutions, where what art is can be dictated or established.

RK: Well, it is an important question as we don't want the festival to follow or to be associated with any certain genres or styles of art. We prefer it to be open. And lately, the Finnish art movement, in my opinion, has been excluding a lot of art, and only promoting this one trend here, or one specific artist there, who are then almost slavishly worshiped. This excludes a lot of art because it might not be easily marketed, or might not be for sale, or is just not easy to promote. This excluded art can, in fact, be good art, and come from a true place—driven by the artist's own passion. We want to bring forth these artists that are on the peripheries.

JS: Would you like, through your practice, to comment on institutions, and their approach?

RK: I don't know how to reply to that. I guess I could say this: diversity is needed. This is good and it's an energy that pushes things forward. But I wouldn't say it stands as my statement per se. It's more an observation. It's something I noticed in the Finnish Art movement. Maybe it's part of something broader we do in Finland in general: we always go together as a group in the same direction.

JS: Do you have something within the festival arrangements that resemble a center/periphery axiom. Maybe something you prioritize more or try to focus differently? Age, gender, or perhaps something else?

RK: The programme is basically made for everyone. The festival is maybe in that sense different [from others] because the audience comes from all generations—we have young children, and ninety- or eighty-year-olds attending, lots of people in their twenties and thirties, too. The organisers belong to various different generations, and maybe this spills over into the programme? It is, in part, a conscious decision to not promote the boundaries—age restrictions, gender differentiations—these are hurdles that are possible to overcome. We are happy to see the interactions between different people of all ages. On the question



Festival crowd. Photo: Pekka Turunen. Dalsbruk, 2014. Courtesy of Festival Norpas.



BlueSkyWhite at Festival Norpas, part of project with Ministry of Education and Culture & the Finnish Institute in St. Petersburg, Dalsbruk, 2018. Courtesy of Festival Norpas



Za! Improvisational workshop performance at the old cast-iron foundry, Dalsbruk, 2017. Courtesy of Festival Norpas

concerning gender, we do not prioritize one gender over the other. The festival has been more about equality. But we have strong opinions on the environment: both Ville and I, and Kristiina, are environmental activists. This is clearly present in the festival. We have our views that are centred on a relationship to nature, and this is something we promote. We take environmental issues seriously. As to other possible priorities, what sort of art we choose is limited to our finite financial resources and the spaces we have available. We can't build big stages—so we do a lot in the old buildings—in nature and the environment of the village—to avoid any extra technical solutions needed for production.

JS: Essentially, you try to use what is available?

RK: Yes, we build and equip performative areas and create technical solutions according to our needs, but we try to do it modestly.

JS: Have you figured out any creative solutions that can circumvent the problem of limited constructions for the festival?

RK: Each year on Sundays we have had an event set in nature that has been very positively received. We take the audience for a hike, and nature in a way acts as a stage. One specific example that comes to mind was set in Söderlångvik, where the audience hiked along the seashore to reach a final performance—a concert on the rocky coastal hillside—it was really impressive scenery with the sea as a backdrop. We've noticed that nature adds something to art. It brings something powerful to it. An element that feels larger than life

JS: So, in a sense, nature is used as a stage for the festival?

RK: It has been used for one day, yes. On Sundays.

JS: To what degree is the community involved—you touched on the subject earlier. What is community for the Festival Norpas?

RK: Community is another aspect of arranging the festival, yes. Those who help organise the festival tend to form their own community, and those who participate as performers or artists form a separate community to their own liking. What we realised over time is that to become part of a community you need to contribute to it in some way—doing things together forms

a community. If you just come into an existing community as a passive spectator—you won't become part of the community.

JS: How do you communicate to your public, and is there something you highlight when you try to reach an audience? Maybe you can tell me something about the channels you use, and the solutions surrounding them?

RK: That is in a way a difficult question—how to communicate and reach people—because sometimes we feel we've been thorough with regard to spreading the word here, but we get the “I didn't know! I never heard about it!” response when meeting new members of the general public in the area. Today, there's so much information everywhere that we are constantly trying to figure out how to push through the noise. We do not have the budget to do any large-scale advertising, and sometimes even posting in newspapers can cost a lot, so we've mostly relied on using social media and posters.



Artist with crowd at old cast-iron foundry. Dalsbruk, 2016. Courtesy of Festival Norpas



Nature as stage: Acrobatic performance, Metsä—the forest project. Dalsbruk, 2017. Photo: Heidi Kuovo. Courtesy of Festival Norpas.

JS: Another follow-up question came to mind: have you collaborated with any larger institutions?

RK: We have, for example, done collaborations with the Festival of Political Photography and the Museum for Rituals and the local Aurinkoinen Tulevaisuus here. We've collaborated with Metropolia—the University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki. But not really any larger art institutions in the traditional sense.

JS: Not the Finnish Museum of Photography?

RK: Well, the Festival of Political Photography is part of the Finnish Museum of Photography. We've exhibited works from the Festival of Political Photography at Festival Norpas. We are, of course, constantly in search of new collaborators, but we think smaller actors are a better fit for us. Although at the moment we actually happen have an ongoing "Russia" project with the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Finnish Institute in St. Petersburg, that's in its second year. The goal has been to present Russian artists in Finland and, vice versa, Finnish artists in Russia.

JS: Was the location for Festival Norpas a conscious decision?

RK: I'd say in part it's because we live here, and Dalsbruk is the only possible location for organising a cultural event like Festival Norpas on Kimito Island. The place has all the resources needed and an attractive environment. It's a combination of several things: nature, a rich history, accommodation possibilities, and services. It has everything that we need.

JS: You touched on the following question earlier—Would you like to share some insights into the financial aspects of the festival? Do you have a strategy for funding?

RK: At the moment, roughly sixty percent of our budget comes from financial aid or funds. Next year is actually the eighth time we have organised the festival, and our budget has quadrupled since the early days. The biggest donors that are supporting us at the moment are the Arts Promoting Centre Finland/Taika, and the Ministry of Education and Culture. The latter is in connection to our Russia project. We get additional support from the Municipality of Kimitoön and

Svenska Kulturfonden—they are at the moment the most significant financial donors.

JS: What is in store for the future of Festival Norpas?

RK: The future is on a year to year basis. I, myself, have the idea of doing ten years in total. A tenth Festival Norpas must be arranged. If something was to happen to this group—if someone gets a better offer from somewhere else [laughs]—then we seriously would need to consider how to proceed. But this is hard to imagine at the moment.

Notes

1 Salon Seudun Sanomat, “Steel executives accused of hiding assets before bankruptcy,” *Yle*, May 17, 2017, accessed Nov. 1, 2018, http://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/steel_executives_accused_of_hiding_assets_before_bankruptcy/9617883.

2 “Festival Surpas,” Gentnormal, accessed February 15, 2019, <http://www.gentnormal.com/2010/08/festival-surpas.html>.

Ritva Kovalainen is an artistic photographer/professor and activist, whose work explores the relationship between man and nature, including the cultural significance of forests and trees, Finnish neopaganism, Shintoism, and environmental impacts of forestry. Throughout her long career, she has frequently exhibited her works domestically in Finland and abroad, including Centro De Arte Alcobendas (Madrid), The Light Factory (Charlotte, NC), among other venues. She has published several books, including *Tree People* with fellow photographer Sanni Seppo, which has been translated into English and Japanese. After an exhibition in Spain, Ritva Kovalainen decided, together with Matias Kauppi, to found ‘Festival Norpas’ in Dalsbruk, where she has acted as curator since its creation in 2012.

Jan Sandberg is a CAS Curating student at ZHdK and previous co-curator of a photographic festival in Finland. His studies focus on visual communication, photography and researching visual identities of cultural institutions. In his spare time, he likes to collect posters and document urban landscapes through photographs.



Audience in Nature. Photo: Heidi Kouvo. Dalsbruk, 2017. Courtesy of Festival Norpas.

A Momentary Centre of the World

A Conversation with Curator Damian Christinger on *Assembleia MotherTree*, Zurich

Maya Bamberger

In the summer of 2018, artist Ernesto Neto (b. 1964, Rio de Janeiro), in collaboration with Fondation Beyeler, presented *GaiaMotherTree*—a monumental installation in the middle of Zurich’s main station. The twenty-metre-high tree-like sculpture was made of coloured, hand-knotted cotton strips and was realized in collaboration with the Huni Kuin, an indigenous community living in the Amazon. The work was open for the public to walk inside it, meditate, and interact with it.

Curator Damian Christinger received a phone call asking him to assist his old friend Ernesto Neto in curating *Assembleia MotherTree*—a two-day assembly convened in the *GaiaMotherTree* tent and at the OnCurating Space in Zurich. Delegates from a few Amerindian communities—the Huni Kuin, Yawanawa, and Tukano—were invited to the *Assembleia*, together with scholars, artists, students, and activists from many parts of the world to sit together in the tent and talk, dance, and sing on the future of our planet.

I invited Damian to have a conversation about the risks and opportunities of inviting people from the Amazon to Zurich. While researching and questioning the dichotomy of centre-periphery in the art world, I wanted to start by looking at the city where I am based and where this issue of OnCurating is written and published, as a case study of positioning oneself on this axis.

Maya Bamberger: What attracted you in the first place, as an individual, to travel to the Amazon and to contact/explore tribal communities?

Damian Christinger: It was a coincidence, as it always is. I was working in Bolivia for an organisation working with street kids, and one of my friends who was half Guarani, half Bolivian, proposed to go visit his people and homeland. I was nineteen and up for anything, and I ended up staying there for three months. I was completely useless for them as a young Swiss man because I didn’t know how to hunt, how to move, how to speak the language, and I found everything dangerous. On the one hand, I was futile, and the jungle was hot, humid, noisy, and gave me many diseases and bodily reactions. On the other hand, it felt like coming home.

MB: In your essay, “Beyond Anthropology: Art, History, and the Unbearable Longing for a Nondual Existence, or Tru Tru, Udu, Udu,”¹ you have written, from an historical anthropological perspective, about Western societies’ longing for a non-dualistic experience. Did you share the same desire to free yourself from the Western dual experience back then?



Ernesto Neto, *Assembleia MotherTree*, 2018, Amerindian delegates of the Huni Kuin, Yawanawa and Tukano. Photograph by Michelle Etlin, courtesy of Fondation Beyeler and Ernesto Neto.

DC: I am not there to find something that I am missing here. I am not a religious person, and I find it impossible to understand spiritual feelings. There are spiritual places in the world in which I cannot even stay. Jerusalem,² for example—I had to leave after one day because it made me physically sick. People in the Amazon don't have missionary zeal.

MB: So, what was their motivation for coming here to Zurich, if they didn't have a message to share?

DC: The fight that they are fighting for land, resources, and freedom is not something they can do only within the Amazon anymore, because what we do here in the West affects them. Their way of solving problems is by engaging—sitting down with everybody and talking it out. Then, they can go back to the way they want to live. First, they need to solve climate change.

MB: Do you also feel this urge to solve climate change?

DC: I do. I don't believe it can be done, but I am willing to engage with everybody who tries to.

MB: I would like to quote one of the many critical reviews of Neto's work, *Um Sagrado Lugar* (A Sacred Place) from the 2017 Venice Biennale:

"Not since Europeans brought indigenous people back from the Americas or Africa to keep as courtly pets or exotic curiosities has it been so fashionable to display the dispossessed and disadvantaged. Is this a disturbing new trend in contemporary art?"³



Ernesto Neto, *Assembleia MotherTree*, 2018, Emanuele Coccia during his lecture. Right hand side: Daniela Zyman. Photograph by Michelle Etlin, courtesy of Fondation Beyeler and Ernesto Neto.



Ernesto Neto, *Assembleia MotherTree*, 2018, A discussion inside Gaia MotherTree during the Assembleia. Photograph by Michelle Etlin, courtesy of Fondation Beyeler and Ernesto Neto.

How did you approach the obstacles of bringing indigenous people to Zurich?

DC: You need to be very careful not to fulfil the Western cravings for the exotic. Artists are exotic creatures. Amerindians are exotic, dressed in feathers and traditional costumes. The biggest challenge was how to work with them and our mutual misunderstandings. At the same time, they wanted to come, and they wanted to engage. I cannot protect them because they are individual, autonomous subjects. The first step was to have very serious people coming together within the framework of a symposium. We have invited critical people who would normally criticise such an endeavour. We mixed the critique within the symposium, not pretending that there is no problem.

MB: This strategy of incorporating the critique into contemporary art sometimes only enables reproduction of the same power structures under the disguise of self-reflection and change.

DC: Yes, of course it does, and that is always a danger. On the other hand, we need to take the critique of such an endeavour seriously and discuss it openly. The alternative would be not to do it at all.

MB: How did the non-Western delegations respond to those concerns?

DC: By telling us that we should stop being so chauvinistic and trying to protect them. Another thing we did was to serve African food, which is eaten by hand.

MB: Why African?

DC: It is not European, it is not Brazilian, it was kind of a neutral ground.

MB: Isn't it problematic to take these gestures of eating and trying to copy them and experience the exoticness of eating with your hands?

DC: It was not mentioned as a big deal. It was just happening. Zurich is my natural habitat; this is where I feel comfortable and know how people talk and react. For you, it is different, right? You are a stranger here. I wanted to slightly undermine our comfort. The Assemblia as a setting shared both Western and non-Western concepts. The symposium—now a Western intellectual event—used to be a place where people could drink and sweat together, and thus share ideas and a sense of community in ancient Greece. In Switzerland, we have the traditional *Landsgemeinde*, in which people meet to vote, and in some villages, it is still in use. The idea of sitting together to discuss important issues is also very native to the Amerindians.

MB: The Assemblia took place in the Hauptbahnhof [NB: Zurich's main train station] and was open to the public, but how many people could actually sit inside the tent? Who was invited?

DC: Everybody was invited. There was no VIP list—it was first come first serve. The Hauptbahnhof is accessible, and random people who happen to pass by could also join in. Yet, it is not an unproblematic environment. In front of the main entrance to the Hauptbahnhof stands a statue of Alfred Escher, a Swiss politician and railway pioneer who was one of the founders of the industrialization in modern Switzerland. Today, it is known that part of his family fortune was made by exploiting slaves in

the Caribbean and possibly in Brazil. Switzerland still considers itself clean from a colonial history.

MB: “Neutral.”

DC: The project tried to be as inclusive as an art project can be, but Switzerland as a country is not. One of the delegates, for example, a critical writer from Uganda, could not get a visa, despite being invited by a major museum.

MB: What was the process of searching for solutions to the possible dangers like? Were you talking about it together? Did you consult other people?

DC: At the beginning, it was the three of us—Neto, Daniela Zyman (the co-curator), and me. And then we opened it up, and everyone who was invited as a delegate had a say about what they would like to contribute.

MB: How has the Assembleia affected you?

DC: It is not unlikely that some of the delegates that we welcomed here in Zurich are in physical danger in Brazil now for the activism they stand for and the rights they try to defend. This is not something I can stay neutral about. I am involved whether I want to be or not.

MB: Where do you see the Assembleia on the spectrum between centre and periphery?



Ernesto Neto, *Assembleia MotherTree*, 2018, Ernesto Neto on the rooftop terrace of the On-Curating Space. Photograph by Michelle Etlin, courtesy of Fondation Beyeler and Ernesto Neto.

DC: An Austrian curator, a Swiss curator, and a Brazilian artist are doing an art project in an artwork in Zurich, which was supported by a Swiss institution (Fondation Beyeler), having Gaia, the personification of earth as its central motive, and inviting people from Brazil, but also from London and Paris. If the measure of success is being in the world and living in a way that connects you to your surroundings, then the Tukanos are the centre and we are the periphery. If you talk about the distribution of wealth, then Switzerland is very much the centre of the world. When we sat at this beautiful sculpture and Putanny was singing... for a moment, it felt like the centre of the world.

Notes

1 Damian Christinger, “Beyond Anthropology: Art, History, and the Unbearable Longing for a Nondual Existence, or Tru Tru, Udu, Udu,” in *Ernesto Neto and the Huni Kuin – Aru Kuxipa*, (Vienna: TBA21, and Berlin: Sternberg Press, , 2015), exhibition catalogue.

2 The interviewer’s hometown.

3 Cristina Ruiz, “The Road to the Venice Biennale is Paved with Good Intentions,” *The Art Newspaper*, May 16, 2017, accessed Jan. 9, 2019, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/review/the-road-to-the-venice-biennale-is-paved-with-good-intentions>.

Damian Christinger (b. 1975, Zurich) is an independent curator, publicist, and lecturer specialized in transcultural theory and practice, the Anthropocene, and cultures of food. He studied Asian art history and intercultural studies at the University of Zurich, and his main focus lies in the construction of “the Other” in intercultural relations and art history. He was a guest curator at TBA21 and at Museum Rietberg and has curated shows in various venues.

Maya Bamberger is a MAS Curating student based in Zurich. She completed her BA in History of Art and cognitive science at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, focussing on the intersections between art and neuroscience. She was the manager of RawArt Gallery, Tel Aviv and an intern at the photography curatorial department at Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Her current research focuses on the art field in Jerusalem.

Interview with Marta Rodriguez Maleck

Dorothee Richter

I met Marta Rodriguez Maleck in New Orleans, during an ASAP [Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present] conference. At the beginning, I felt quite sceptical about the project *Take an Apology, Leave an Apology* (read more about the project below) and thought: is this not a rather bourgeois concept of creating and dealing with guilt? But when Marta spoke about the project, I got interested, excited, and convinced. She handed around some of the letters, and I remember two of them: the first one I opened said: “I am sorry that I made fun of your artwork”—which, of course, probably everyone in the arts could say as well—and the other one was, “I am sorry that I did not fully realize what happened to you by our father, I wish I had helped you in that situation.” I am sure, all of you, dear readers, have experienced moments of deep regret, that spoke out of this. As this was, of course, not made up, the encounter with concerns of other human beings came in a way as a shock. In the workshop with Marta, we were also asked to write one of these letters, and astonishingly—it really took me by surprise—I also wrote a very long letter to my mother. This worked like an exercise from Psychodrama,¹ but it definitely worked, and I felt very relieved after this. The images she showed in her presentation were enticing. The experience made me very curious about Marta’s practice and approaches, which I wanted to find out more about and make her interesting, unafraid projects publicly available.

Dorothee Richter: Tell us about your background. What does or has inspired you in your work?

Marta Rodriguez Maleck: I am a New Orleans-based painter, sculptor, filmmaker, and installation artist. My work strives to break down barriers to communication by sharing my own vulnerable personal stories as well as those of my extended network. These stories explore self-care, trauma, womanhood, queerness, generational differences, family, and Hispanic identity.

This past year, I’ve mounted several shows and projects including a solo show called *Not Nothing* in October, a collaboration with Ashley Teamer called *But I Didn’t Mean it Like That*, and a collaboration with

Kevin Brisco Jr. called *Take an Apology, Leave an Apology*, which was an aspect of Carlos Rolón’s show, *Outside/In*.

Whether my work is exploring the memory of a place, a time, or a person, it always seeks to show them in multifaceted ways. This approach allows me to honour multiple truths at once, dismantle assumptions based on perceived identity, and encourage communication between groups of people who come from different backgrounds with their own set of expectations.

DR: How do your previous projects relate to the more recent projects?

MRM: My most recent projects include *Not Nothing*, a solo project about childhood development, trauma, and education and *But I Didn’t Mean it Like That*, a collaboration that was created in order to promote communication between people who come from different backgrounds.

Not Nothing was a show that considered both the ways the educational systems create trauma in children and how early childhood trauma can create problems for students in school. In New Orleans, I recognised students being negatively stereotyped based on race and social class. This form of institutional racism caused trauma in the students at school. Beyond that, children are already dealing with their own struggles, whether it is poverty, violence, or otherwise outside of the school day. This contributes to their ability to feel safe, focused, and successful in any setting. These concepts were illuminated to me by the work I do with a non-profit that partners with Charter Schools in New Orleans to bring arts education to students after school.

The idea for *Take an Apology, Leave an Apology* was originally sparked by an aspect of my job. Part of what I do is help students struggling in their classes to figure out why and develop a plan going forward to avoid ongoing issues. Sometimes they would be sent to me for getting into fights, being disrespectful, or being disruptive. Part of the process was to write an apology letter if they were disrespectful to whomever



But I Didn't Mean it Like That, installation view, performance at Prospect.4, Photo: M. Rodriguez Maleck



But I Didn't Mean it Like That, Family Perspective (detail), Multimedia installation, Photo: M. Rodriguez Maleck



But I Didn't Mean It Like That, Family Perspective, Multimedia installation, Photo: M. Rodriguez Maleck

they offended. These letters were my first insight into the array of what an apology could look like.

The project *But I Didn't Mean It Like That* takes people's stories of miscommunication and puts them side-by-side, so the viewers are able to see multiple perspectives at once. We have a very diverse group of voices with the intention of highlighting underrepresented and often misrepresented viewpoints. *Take an Apology*, *Leave an Apology* relates to this work in that it ultimately strives for the goal of bringing about an understanding of someone else's feelings and experiences.

DR: Is the choice of the location/context important to your projects? If so, how did you choose the location of your project?

MRM: This past year I worked with collaborator, Kevin Brisco Jr., to create an installation at the New Orleans Museum of Fine Art as an activation of Carlos Rolón's *Hustleman Cart*. Carlos created the cart to show nationally, inviting different people to activate it. It was an exciting opportunity because Kevin and I recognized the ways we could tap into a new audience.

I normally show my work in smaller, more experimental venues, galleries, and the collective I am a member

of, called Good Children Gallery, here in New Orleans, LA. At the NOMA, we had over 700 people come participate in just one week.

It was interesting to give control to the viewers to create the work. Our original 2,500 letters on the cart were sourced from students, friends, family, other artists, famous political public statements, and anonymous responses to our Craigslist ad. As time went on, more and more were replaced by the handwritten words of museum-goers. The museum is an institution that likes to have control over the words and works people see there. At first, the curators tried to remove the letters written by museum-goers, in case there was inappropriate language or subject matter. Over time, however, possibly because they recognised it was impossible to keep track of them all, they gave up that control.

Although the location was originally necessary to prompt the concept, now that the idea has been conceived, I can see it living in other locations, continuing its evolution.

DR: What was the scope of the work *Take an Apology* *Leave an Apology*?



But I Didn't Mean it Like That, Insider's Perspective, Multimedia installation, Photo: M. Rodriguez Maleck

MRM: The installation of *Take an Apology Leave an Apology* that Kevin Brisco Jr. and I created examined the emotional currency of an apology through recognizing the imbalance of what you give versus what you receive. Each participant was invited to write an apology letter in exchange for one they select at random from the *Nomadic Habitat* cart, a component created by Carlos Rolón for his show *Outside/In* at the New Orleans Museum of Art. It was up to the participants to decide the sincerity of their offering. They could take the opportunity to ask for forgiveness for a deep regret from their past, or offer a justification and defence for a transgression they were truly not sorry for. The stock apologies they chose from were personal letters of atonement written by the museum patrons and artists themselves, childish false apologies penned by New Orleans elementary and middle school students, or even well-known statements delivered by US politicians and celebrities. The participant selected an envelope containing an apology at random and exchanged the one they wrote in its place, left to contemplate the imbalance between their own offering and what they received.

With this project, we were able to facilitate a discussion about the weight/worth of apologies. Often the act of apologizing is treated as an exchange, with

certain expectations divorced from any true sincerity. What happens when personal anguish is met with false sincerity, or worse, thinly veiled combativeness? How does one react when their own cynicism is met with a vulnerable plea for forgiveness? When is this apology game unfit for the crime committed? We were excited to present this project on Rolón's *Nomadic Habitat (Hustleman)* because we felt it was directly linked to the concept of informal commerce, as everyday emotional exchanges hold value and create a market of their own.

DR: What motivated the project initially? Do you have an urge to make things differently?

MRM: Katie Pfohl, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the New Orleans Museum of Art, and Allison Young, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow for Modern and Contemporary Art, invited New Orleans artists to propose collaboration ideas for Carlos Rolón's *Hustleman Cart*.

In considering the cart, Kevin Brisco Jr. and I realized we needed to do something transactional, in order to draw parallels to the theme of currency that Carlos was going after. At the time, I had been collecting apol-



Not Nothing, Parent Teacher Conference, Sound Installation, Corded phones, Children's table and chairs, Voices of parents and teachers, Photo: M. Rodriguez Maleck



Not Nothing, Installation view, Multimedia installation, Photo: M. Rodriguez Maleck

ogy letters that my students wrote to each other and to their teachers. Whenever they did something disruptive or disrespectful, these letters were a way of getting them to reflect and come up with a new plan for next time. Although this activity was originally planned for kids, I recognized more and more how awful some adults were at apologizing as well.

When we say we are sorry for something, and mean it, we hope to receive the same amount of closure from the person we are communicating with. The reality is that the emotional labour we give isn't usually reciprocal to what we receive. The hope with this project was to prompt people to recognize the imbalances within their own relationships, leading them to demand more or give more depending on their needs.

DR: How do you position yourself and your work within the global contemporary art discourse?

MRM: When we talk about global contemporary art, we must consider inclusivity—who is invited to participate and who can see themselves in the work. I think what's relevant about this work is its vulnerability, universality, and necessity for participation. Although not all cultures have the same relationship to regret, many people do have a relationship to emotional currency and emotional labour. Moreover, it's a project that encourages individuals to reflect on themselves and share those reflections as a means to better understand each other. By creating work that evolves as participants take from and give to it, we reflect all who chose to engage.

DR: How important is it to engage with the general public in your work?

MRM: With an interest in engaging a wide audience, I show my work in many contexts: from white-walled galleries, to museums, online venues, magazines, conferences, DIY house shows, and everything in between. I invite not only the standard contemporary art viewers, but also the students and families I work with daily. Currently, I am involved in a collaborative project that has us positioned to do interviews in the shopping mall. By working in very accessible places, and working with people who do not normally see themselves as artists, I strive to make my work approachable.

Beyond venue, my work strives to have easily understandable content. Regardless of age, background,

education, or experience with art, I want the work to have something for everyone. There are often second meanings, inside jokes, or secret messages in my work that would take additional time to find, but on the surface I like to have something easy to grab onto conceptually and visually.

DR: How has the community/or audience responded to the project?

MRM: I am honoured to feel such a positive response to the work I've made. Over the past couple years, I've seen people cry, laugh, and talk about the work. For people to care that much feels like a great accomplishment.

The responses to *Take and Apology*, *Leave an Apology* amazed me. Some people wrote long heartfelt regrets for transgressions decades old. Some people simply and snarkily wrote that they had nothing to be sorry for. Some people apologized for who they were; others, for what they had asked for from their family, friends, or loved ones. Some letters were pictures, some concrete poetry, and one was actually totally blank—the envelope just simply said, “Sorry this is empty :(.”

On social media, people posted some amazing letters that really spoke to them. I recall one woman who was a sex worker received a letter saying, “I'm sorry I just see your body as an object.” It was strange how some of the letters felt so personal to the people who received them.

My hope is that over time, participants will see the relevance of this action in their own lives and be prompted to reflect on their actions in moments of making amends.

DR: How do you see your work *Take an Apology*, *Leave an Apology* evolving in the future?

MRM: For me, the strength of *Take an Apology*, *Leave an Apology* is in how the piece evolved based on participation. It's a strategy I will continue to use in my future projects. I want my work to change based on the process of how it's made. With *Take an Apology*, *Leave an Apology*, it will mean installing the work in a new place, making a publication of some of the responses and hopefully making smaller personalised boxes that individuals can have and pull from when they want to revisit the experience on their own time. For the installation work, such as an evolution of *Not*



Take an Apology Leave an Apology, Installation view, with Artists Kevin Brisco Jr. and Marta Rodriguez Maleck, Photographer M. Rodriguez Maleck

Nothing, I am interested in having more voices be a part of the creation of the work.

When I was installing *Not Nothing*, a friend's son came to visit my studio. He was looking at one of the papier mâché pieces and asking if it was a tunnel he could crawl through. Immediately I thought to myself, "No, but it should be!" By inviting the ideas and opinions of people who the work is for, the work will gain more relevance to its audience.

DR: How do you feel about the umbrella notions of the centre-periphery in your work—or in general?

One of the exciting things about making work for peripheral locations is that the art feels very unique and specific to the place and audience it's being made for. All peripheral locations feel central to someone. For certain projects, the voices and stories of the people that make up the work are familiar enough to feel impactful. For instance, in the project *Not Nothing*, individual voices were heard through corded phones, headphones, and on screen explaining the Charter School takeover, the mass firing of teachers, and the subsequent institutional racism within the educational

system in post-Katrina New Orleans. This body of work has the potential to be impactful anywhere, in that it would communicate the struggles of recovery, even thirteen years after Hurricane Katrina. What makes it especially relevant to show it here is the way it speaks on a personal level to those who have lived that experience.

Being invited to show in larger, more central locations can be challenging, in that the work needs to feel more universally relevant if you want people to continue to deeply engage and understand it. It's one of the reasons I make work that touches on the emotional, which can be understood universally. In the project, *Take an Apology, Leave an Apology*, we collected our original 2,500 letters by asking for submissions. We used Craigslist, an American classified advertisements website, and posted requests for apologies of any kind to the top 20 most populated cities nationwide. What was consistent was that people shared the same array of feelings, regardless of location, age, race, class, etc. Although created on a peripheral prompt, this project has the potential to travel and feel relevant beyond its original installation.



Take an Apology Leave an Apology, Detail of cart, Photographer M. Rodriguez Maleck

DR: Tell us a bit more about the different collaborators and actors who played an important role in shaping your work?

MRM: When the curators from the NOMA asked the artists in the collective I am a part of to propose projects, it was natural for Kevin and I to look to each other to collaborate. We have been friends for a long time and worked to produce a couple other successful shows together in years past. For *Take an Apology, Leave an Apology*, artistically and intellectually we had similar goals based on what we wanted to communicate and who we wanted to communicate to.

Identity plays into how people participate and understand this piece. For me, it was interesting to see how people confessed their truths in the form of never-before-said apologies. Kevin was more interested in how rare it was for men to apologize compared to women. He pointed out the way that apologizing for a man can feel like a form of weakness and how that was reflected in our responses.

A few of the most sincere and deep apologies came from us, the original contributors. Among many topics,

I chose to highlight women's issues, violence perpetrated by men, and how religion plays into that. Kevin dug into moments of regret that happened throughout his life within mostly white institutions as a black man. These documented cross-cultural encounters meant there was a variety of outcomes for the viewers.

My other main collaboration is with my best friend, Ashley Teamer, with a project called *But I Didn't Mean it Like That*. She and I started exhibiting together about six years ago and soon started performing in drag shows, curating art exhibitions together, and eventually made work collaboratively. Initially we were inspired by conversations we had about our relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners. At the time, we were both in biracial relationships, and the two of us wanted to explore our intersectional identities with each other and our partners. We kept hearing this phrase meant as an excuse for a misunderstanding, "I didn't mean it like *that...*". What was felt and understood, however, seemed more relevant to us than intention. To me, this feels like an important thing to remember when making work as well. The project manifested as an installation in which people on screen shared their stories of times when they said



Take an Apology Leave an Apology, Detail of side table, Photographer M. Rodriguez Maleck

one thing but really meant another and how they overcame this boundary of miscommunication. Based on the positive response to the work and need to bring people from different backgrounds together, Ashley and I are continuing this project, with its second iteration debuting in March 2019.

In both these projects, the voices of the interviewees or the letter writers is what makes the work, and therefore they are also considered collaborators. The strength of the work is that it is so multifaceted. We invite people across racial, generational, and economic lines. Since many perspectives are represented, there are always voices to relate to, and to learn from.

DR: How do you relate to art institutions and how has your experience been working with institutions on the project?

MRM: I think there is an opportunity for art to make people question themselves, their intentions, and their actual impact on a large scale. With *Take an Apology, Leave an Apology*, the hope was to get people to reflect on how we communicate to each other, the levels of support and respect we give one another, and to promote self-respect in regards to the level of integrity we hold ourselves to and demand for ourselves. When installing the *Take an Apology, Leave an Apology* project at the New Orleans Museum of Art, we were upset to find out that the letters we intended on installing had been censored by the curatorial staff. Language

was the main concern, although subject matter also kept some of the letters out of view. We did argue for and ultimately get certain apologies to remain in the installation, specifically those that we felt people could really learn from. Originally the institution wanted to keep out anything related to racial tension and violence against women. Ultimately what ended up happening is that we have a more powerful and emotionally charged version of this project that could still use a home.

With *Not Nothing*, the gallery I showed in was in a gentrifying neighbourhood, and there were tensions between the black community, specifically the kids, and the white gallery sitters and art purveyors. I pulled from recognisable and fun imagery to create a space where kids felt excited and welcomed. I used interviews and archival footage of teachers, parents, students, educational activists, and politicians to get white transplants to recognize their culpability in the criminalisation of New Orleans youth, as well as a better understanding of what kinds of struggles kids are facing. In terms of *But I Didn't Mean it Like That*, we wanted to break down assumptions people had of one another by presenting new perspectives on common miscommunications. These projects evolve as the issues of our time evolve. Opinions change, struggles change, and solutions change. I believe art has the capacity to push that progress forward.

DR: Would you say that there a decolonising impetus within your project?

MRM: One of the main things we recognised with this project is that certain things have never and will never be apologized for. Originally, we wanted there to be a receipt printer that you could press when you finalised your transaction, i.e., exchanged your letter for one on the cart. In pop culture, receipts have become synonymous with keeping track of all the problematic occurrences over time. The printed receipt in our installation would type out some of the larger historical atrocities that still have rippling effects. Ultimately, we weren't able to include the receipt printer, because the museum felt it would be too easily broken by the museum-goers. The idea of cataloguing the global geopolitical crimes that have been committed, however, was still the impetus for our project; it was a response to the way that larger structures don't have to apologize, even though everyone has something to apologize for.



Take an Apology Leave an Apology, Installation view, with Artists Kevin Brisco Jr. and Marta Rodriguez Maleck, Photo: M. Rodriguez Maleck

Ultimately, though, our project did allow everyone, including the most marginalised people, to have a voice within the work. By having such a varied group of participants and creating such an inclusive way for the piece to evolve, we were able to go beyond a single culture's set of imposed ideas.

When it comes to apologising, usually people in power don't have to because they can use their privilege to ignore their wrongdoings. *Take an Apology, Leave an Apology* demands reciprocity. Leaving the letter you receive and opinion you read up to chance is a form of decolonising in that it breaks the norm of certain voices (traditionally those in power) taking up more space and making more demands in a conversation. By seeing how others apologise, we can analyse different levels of ownership over our own actions and therefore promote saying, "I'm sorry," as an act of healing.

Notes

I Jacob Levy Moreno (born Iacob Levy; May 18, 1889 – May 14, 1974) was a Romanian-American psychiatrist,

psychosociologist, and educator, the founder of psychodrama, and the foremost pioneer of group psychotherapy. During his lifetime, he was recognized as one of the leading social scientists. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob_L._Moreno and see about psychodrama also <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychodrama>, accessed Nov 2018.

Marta Rodriguez Maleck is an artist, filmmaker, and organizer who's work explores both social and political subjects including education, access, trauma, self care, communication, and Hispanic identity. This past year, her work was published in 'New American Paintings' and 'HISS magazine' and most recently shown at Ground Floor Gallery in Brooklyn, NY and Good Children Gallery in New Orleans, LA. Marta currently works as a Site Director with a nonprofit called Community Works, an arts enrichment program partnering with New Orleans schools. In the past she founded an arts mentorship program for New Orleans high schoolers called AccomplishArts and currently she focuses her organizing efforts on a gathering called 'The Ark,' a party that celebrates cherished chosen family, friends, and New Orleans memories. Marta has exhibited at the NOMA, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, and the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. She was a resident at FUTURA, the Center for Contemporary Art in Prague, Czech Republic, the Ace Hotel (New Orleans, LA) the Vermont Studio Center (Johnson, VT), Popp's Packing (Detroit, MI), and at ACRE (Steuben, WI). Together with collaborator Ashley Teamer, Marta founded Double Diamond Collective and Exhibition Space which prioritizes highlighting the stories of underrepresented and misrepresented minority groups. Their personal project, *But I Didn't Mean it Like That* is a film based installation which strives to bring people from different backgrounds together to overcome barriers of miscommunication. In November 2018, Double Diamond mounted their first iteration of this project, a multimedia installation and Satellite of Prospect.4. They received a Platforms Grant through the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and a New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation Grant for this work. Marta will mount her 3rd solo show in May 2019 at Baby Blue Gallery in Chicago, IL.

La Quadreria di Anita Spinelli: A Place Where Silence and Dynamism Prevail

Interview with Maria-Cristina Donati Camille Regli

It is the mid-1920s, and Anita Spinelli lives with the immeasurable desire and determination to paint and to do art. Living on the border of Italy in the Italian part of Switzerland, in Ticino, the young artist makes the daily journey to Milan to attend her classes at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan. After graduating in 1933 as one of the first Swiss female artists of the prestigious art school, she engages with the vivacious arts scene of Milan, visits several European cities including Paris and Vienna, but also goes to Africa, the United States, and to Assisi in Italy, where she lives in a monastery to study Giotto's frescoes. Subsequently, she moves to the remote mansion of Pignora in Ticino—the place she would stay for most of her life, establishing her studio and collection. Determined to affirm her art and status in a scene dominated by men, she becomes an active member of the Society of Swiss Artists, Sculptors and Architects, and is invited to exhibit her work at the 19th and 20th Swiss National Art Exhibits of 1936 and 1941. Particularly acknowledged for her innovative modes of expression, she opens her first solo exhibition in Lausanne in 1938. She is also shown in various personal and collective exhibitions in institutional and private spaces in Switzerland and further afield. In 2002, a permanent display of her work is created and named the “Quadreria,” right next to her estate in the hills of Novazzano, in Ticino. The last major full-career retrospective is organised at the Museum of Art of Lugano in 2008. Vigorously working in her atelier every day until the very end, she passes away in 2010 at the age of 102.

Maria-Cristina Donati has been in charge of the Anita Spinelli's legacy since 2014. Managing the art space Quadreria, she regularly mounts thematic exhibitions of the artist's works and organises private visits and curatorial tours to perpetuate the heritage.

Camille Regli: It seems extremely important for the art collection to remain where it was created, in this beautifully remote and inspiring location on the border of Italy in the canton of Ticino. Could you tell us a bit more about the location, its meaning and why it is considered such a special place?

Maria-Cristina Donati: The location of the Quadreria on the estate where Anita Spinelli lived and worked most of her life offers a special setting for understanding and entering the artwork of the artist. It closely relates to her working process. Situated on the hills that roll out onto the Italian plain, amidst meadows and woods although not far from urban centres, it transmits a feeling of remoteness. A special quality of silence prevails here. Though attached and rooted to this place, Anita Spinelli never confined herself. Driven by intellectual curiosity and by the desire to

overcome boundaries, she sojourned repeatedly in various continents. This was part of her working process and artistic research. In terms of the tension between periphery and centre, she would immerse herself in the newest urban artistic centres—let's bear in mind that these centres have shifted over time, e.g. from Milan and Paris to New York, London, Berlin, etc.—and enter in dialogue with innovative artworks. She explored centres as much as peripheries, seeking direct encounters with other cultures, other spatialities, other rhythms and lights. It was her way of questioning the essence of the human condition.

After scrutinising the world, she always returned to her remote studio to centre herself in silence, process the information, and proceed with the artistic elaboration. Her creative process becomes a slow, almost meditative one, made of filtering and interiorisation to reach the essence of her subjects, to reveal the profound nature of the emotions and pain, unveiling the fragility of the human being. The tension between dynamism and silence takes shape. The duality between her openness to the world and the need to isolate herself reflects a self-conscious striving for independence in a male-dominated art world. It is a way for her to subtract herself from constraining structures. This act of liberation is perceivable in her art in “being able to bring up new and fresh approaches in all her developments” (Bruno Corà, Italian art curator).¹ Also expressed by art historian Kornelia Imesch, “the artist's life-long wrestling with artistic form and truth, with human cognisance and feminine independence [in which] are bound the core existential questions, which make her oeuvre current and timeless”². Indeed, in the Quadreria better than anywhere else,



Anita Spinelli, *Canto della terra*, 1995, oil on canvas, 135 x 173 cm. Photo: Enzo Corti. Courtesy Maria-Cristina Donati



Installation view of "La Quadreria".



Installation view of "La Quadreria".

you might grasp the mystery of Anita Spinelli's creativity: how did she draw the force to continuously reinvent herself, the urgency to create?

CR: This duality between an observatory and an almost 'monastic retreat' is indeed paramount to comprehend her art. In order to further grasp this duality, let me come back to the peripheral location of the Quadreria as it comes with its premises: on one hand, it is admirable that the collection holds such a proximity to the setting of the art and the artist's life, on the other hand how do you handle the isolation in terms of public access and visibility?

MCD: Conceived as an art container, the Quadreria, which was created in a warehouse on the estate, draws on a representative collection of the artist's work covering all periods and techniques, from oil painting and drawings to prints. This makes it possible to periodically organise thematic exhibitions and experiment with new hangings. Such curatorial work opens up new views and discourses, bringing new insights into the work that are fascinating.

The Quadreria opens upon request for individuals and groups. Given its remote location, it cannot rely on passers-by. Instead it relies on art aficionados, who commit to travelling to discover the artwork. You need to take the time to visit the space and to immerse yourself in the art. The visitors are mainly insiders who know about it through word-of-mouth, as well as scholars and art professionals. We have also started to organise open-door events that we communicated locally. Given the positive response and prominent attendance, we shall continue such initiatives. We realised that there is a demand, or more precisely an urge to become more open and public, and to give access to a broader audience, that until today was much more exclusive.

CR: To some extent, if we understand the 'peripheral' as a way to open up new cultural spaces and to get away from rigid authoritative institutional structures, there might be room to rethink the meaning of and access to art. Do you agree with this statement?

MCD: Private collections, associative or private spaces, or ad hoc initiatives offer an exceptional opportunity for art encounters outside the mainstream. They have a disruptive potential in an art world that is more and more constrained. Institutional structures have gone a long way in opening up; however, they face increasing market pressures and constraints to meet numbers, which can condition their choices. It ends up being an issue of competition and of resource allocation, of scaling. Thus, initiatives outside the institutional setting have a subversive potential in creating more diversity. It is a question of choices. Who decides what is to be seen? How to decide what to see? The offer in cultural activities, access to art competing to gain awareness is huge; plus, the unprecedented power of globalisation and communication tools contribute to channelling our choices. Are there still general definitions of art and its meaning, or is the pertinence of the answer an individual one? To me, the answer lies in the urgency and sincerity, as well as the technical skill of a work, its originality, and what emotions or thoughts an artwork creates. Initiatives at the margin carry the potential of creating these situations, of creating surprises and discoveries. The issue is how to find them, how to create a network built on local initiatives.



The outside of “La Quadreria”, Novazzano, 2018. Photo Lorenza Donati

CR: Do you have any plans or further intentions for the Quadreria? Do you intend to pursue collaborations with curators, artists, and local initiatives to increase knowledge about the collection?

MCD: An artwork has to travel, to be visible, and to communicate itself. So, collaborations with professionals and institutions are definitely important bridges. Equally important is the research for deepening and understanding Anita Spinelli’s work, which entails pursuing the fruitful collaboration with universities, with students, art historians, and more. Experimentation with curators but also with artists could bring new insights, create synergies, and produce unexpected results.

CR: As a matter of fact, some works of Anita Spinelli were featured in the recent exhibitions *Surrealismus Schweiz* at the Aargauer Kunsthaus (2018) curated by Peter Fischer and Julia Schallberger, and at the MASI in Lugano (2019) curated by Tobia Bezzola and Francesca Benini, shedding light on Swiss artists having had influences in the surrealist movements of the 20th century. Do you perceive those exchanges with bigger institutions as a way to increase awareness?

MCD: These are definitively opportunities to open the discourse of an artist and, as you point out, to enrich the narrative of an exhibition. Integrating it into a bigger institutional exhibition is also a way to de-contextualise a work and to look at what happens when it is extracted from its context. When it encounters other works, new relations are built, other dynamics are created, and another view might emerge. With regard to the wonderful exhibition *Surrealism Switzerland*, the experience was particularly interesting because Anita Spinelli never considered herself, nor has she ever been considered, a surrealist. Nevertheless, surrealist traits do emerge from her work, demonstrating the impact that surrealism had on later artists' developments.

Notes

1 Bruno Corrà, *Anita Spinelli-Monografie*, ed. Cristina Brazzola (Lugano: Edizioni Città di Lugano, 2008).

2 Kornelia Imesch, *Anita Spinelli-Monografie*, ed. Cristina Brazzola (Lugano: Edizioni Città di Lugano, 2008).

Maria-Cristina Donati holds a BA in Political Science from the University of Lausanne and a Master of Science in Management at the MIT Sloan School of Management, Cambridge, Massachusetts. She gained working experience on international development issues with OECD and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs before entering the financial industry, where she held managing positions in international economic research, large restructuring projects and strategic management. She is president of the medical research foundation Franco Regli. She is Anita Spinelli's granddaughter and manages the artist's estate and art space since 2014.

Camille Regli holds a master in cultural studies at King's College London and a MAS in Curating at ZHdK, Zurich. She worked for the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne and currently works as Arts PR consultant specialising in contemporary art. She also regularly takes part in curatorial projects and curated group shows at the OnCurating Project Space (OCPS) in Zurich as well as a performance in collaboration with Zürich moves festival (2019). Her curatorial and research interests lay in the exploration of alternative narratives/storytelling in the context of immersive art exhibitions, and the subversive aesthetics associated with performance art. She is based between London and Zurich.

The Gaze of the Black Madonna. A Political Conversation with Theaster Gates

Damian Christinger

In his groundbreaking book *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North*, published in 1944, Arthur Huff Fauset (1899–1983) describes six different black churches, or cults as he calls them, in great sociological detail. As different as they were, they all had some characteristics in common, be it the “Church of God” (a.k.a. The Black Jews) or the “Moorish Science Temple of America,” founded in 1913: They all believed that the salvation of African Americans must be based in faith, but that it needed a shift in the way that God must be gazed at, understood, and worshiped. Veneration meant not only salvation but also liberation.

A church, which was founded after the publication of the book, in 1953, is of particular interest for the conversation I had with artist Theaster Gates on his series of exhibitions in Europe centred on the ideas of the “Black Madonna.” The four stations include the Kunstmuseum Basel (9 June–21 October 2018), the Sprengel Museum in Hannover (23 June–9 September 2018), the Fondazione Prada (20 September 2018–14 January 2019) and the Haus der Kunst in Munich (25 October 2019–3 May 2020). The four manifestations will have distinct local focal points dealing with the European ideas of the Black Madonna, but they will all have at its centre an archive of photos of women of the Johnson Publishing Company, which published *Ebony* and *Jet*, two of the most influential magazines for popular black culture since 1945. Or as the artist puts it...

Theaster Gates: If I do a show at a certain place, I look for a loose site-specific angle. I wouldn't do a show in Basel just about the Johnson Publishing Company; there is, of course, an interconnection to the traditions in Switzerland, for example to Einsiedeln. But there is always a clash, it boils down to: my Madonna ain't your Madonna, ideologically and spiritually. Everybody has their own version of the Black Madonna. The Polish, the French, the Italians, the Turkish, and the Swiss. They have a clear image of her, a tradition. We lack that; we had to invent our own. I was nineteen when I saw the Black Madonna by Glanton Dowdell—while visiting relatives in Detroit—for the first time.

The church we are talking about was founded in 1953 by the Reverend Albert Buford Cleage, Jr. (1911–2000) in Detroit and given the evocative name “The Shrine of the Black Madonna.” The church later changed its name to PAOCC or the “Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church.” The PAOCC emphasizes that the survival of black people and salvation are dependent on working for the good of the community and rejecting individualism. To this end, the church seeks to build a nation within a nation where black people can create institutions to promote their political, economic, psychological, and social wellbeing.

Inside the original church in Detroit, one finds a rough yet attractive painting by Glanton Dowdell (1923–2000), executed in 1967, called (of course) *Black Madonna with Child*.

Glanton Dowdell is nearly unrecognized within art history (with the notable exception of a book by Jawanza Eric Clark). It seems that he began painting in prison, where he served twelve years and ten months for second-degree murder, and where he also became politicized. The commission for the painting of the Black Madonna Chancel Mural was “a collective vision” as Clark calls it. The draft for the membership text, “Welcome to the Black Nation! A Guide of Central United Church of Christ, The Shrine of the Black Madonna,” states: “We have been told and shown through Italian Renaissance painters that Jesus was Aryan with blonde hair and blue eyes. We are also led to believe that Christianity called on black people to do nothing about oppression... We reject these distorted teachings. [...] Our first project was to commission a black artist to paint a picture of Mary, the mother of Jesus – our black Madonna.”

Dowdell later fled to Stockholm in 1969, claiming political asylum, stating that the police and FBI were fabricating charges against him for political reasons. On the rudimentary website, glantondowdell.org, one finds an undated newspaper clipping from an unspecified local newspaper with a photo a smiling Dowdell and a sombre-looking woman with the caption:

Mr. and Mrs. Glanton Dowdell find comfort at church service, after a tense, frustrating ordeal for Mrs. Dowdell over nearly a week of confinement of her husband and worry of what might happen to him. Glanton was arrested with two other men the night before the curfew during the recent civil disturbance was declared by Gov. Romney. The trio said they were told by the arresting officers that they had violated the curfew. They quoted an officer of saying when Dowdell gave his name, “so you are the Black



Theaster Gates, *Black Madonna*, 2018, Museum of Contemporary Art Basel, Photo Credit: Julian Salinas

S.O.B. who painted that G.D. Black Madonna.” They said the officer then hit him with the butt of his rifle...and more beatings followed.

Theaster Gates: I had just started my undergraduate minor in religious studies. When I saw the shrine for the first time, it kicked something off. Maybe it was a kind of starting point for my inquiries into the Black Power Movement and something that we might call the Post Black Power Movement. So, after Fred Hampton is shot, after Stokely Carmichael left, after people are exiled, you had this moment where young people from Berkeley and UC Santa Barbara, they then become professors, they become less political, less loud and then other people go to the church. And there they are able to create a political force, a propaganda force through talking about Jesus and Mary; they are able to talk about the power of black women and black men. The Black Madonna in Detroit is as much political as she is spiritual. It is a raw and powerful image, intended for people who didn't have a lot of contact with the world of art. She is essentially an everyday woman. The fact that the painting might not be what people call “high art” makes it maybe into high black politics. It needs to be low art in order to be effective as propaganda, as a message of activism of its time. Anything that might be considered high art would be some European shit. Because you have to, of course, ask who defines what is “high.” What I love about Johnson and probably what I have embedded in my work is that rather than talking about “high” or “low,” they are willing to make formal informal things. So, it might be my knowledge of formalism in making low things formal—not trying to make them “high”—but I do like the idea with John Johnson that we can present the best version of ourselves. It might just be ironing your shirt, trying to be the best you can be in the station that you are in. These



Theaster Gates, *Do You Hear Me Calling: Ma Ma Madonna or What Is Black Power*; 2018, Museum of Contemporary Art Basel, Photo Credit: Julian Salinas

are codes that my mother and my niece, her granddaughter, would now fight about. So my niece would say, “I would like to have a Fendi purse,” and my mom would say, “Take care of the purse you have.” In my Mom’s mind, you should take care of the things you have. Through your labour and effort, applying saddle soap to your purse to keep it like new, you could fulfil your aspirations.

Contrasting with the sleek and popular publications like *Jet* were intellectual, discourse-oriented magazines like *Crisis* (where Fauset’s half-sister Jessie Redmont Fauset was the literary editor) and where W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) published his highly influential essay “Criteria of Negro Art” in 1926, where he writes, “Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be.”

Theaster Gates: So let’s unpack this a little. If we consider Du Bois within the Black Power movement or AfriCOBRA and similar movements that grew afterwards... On this level, propaganda could be read as something that has to reflect the black image, the black male and the black female. We should see everyday people doing everyday things. It should be the language of black people. Slang, whatever that is. It should be rhythmic, you know, it should be colourful, it should be attractive. That is one way of reading propaganda, as something that has a populist intent, and maybe my video work is trying to get at this question: what is black power? My work seems somewhere between a propagandistic truth and black representation. Most importantly, it aims at black ambition, not even aspiration—maybe even past aspiration. That one day I want to be here, that’s aspiration. Ambition is more like I am going to do this. Like, let us do this and that for me, Johnson had ambition not aspiration. He was selling aspiration, but he had ambition.

The entrance hall of the Kunstmuseum Basel is dominated by a black sculpture of a Madonna – cast with tar - with a Baby Jesus in her lap, who is strangely missing one arm. Surrounding the life-sized sculpture there is a continuous bookshelf, mounted at eye level, supporting a half-circle of 2500 books. They are all bound in black leather with gold lettering on the spine and seem to protect and venerate the Black Madonna at the same time.

Damian Christinger: *What kind of library am I looking at?*

Theaster Gates: I work a lot with archives in cities like Chicago or Detroit. We buy whole collections of books or LPs connected to black culture and make them public for the communities involved. It is unavoidable that there are doubles or even triplets of the same book when you bring different collections together. So, I started to use them as a kind of material, a basis from which to work with. I took the title of the book as a starting point, sometimes just a word, sometimes an associative phrase, and started to play around with different combinations, thus creating poems by the titles on the back of the books, which I had then bound in black leather with the parts of the poem on the back in gold lettering. It would be great if the visitors read their individual poems aloud, creating a collective performance, a prayer-like atmosphere.

This is the beauty of archives, that they can provide the soil for other things to grow, that they can mean different things to different people without losing

their inner strength. The poetic possibilities within these archives or libraries are endless...

DC: *The books, or the poems, seem to be protecting the Black Madonna, who is protecting her son?*

TG: The model for the cast of the baby was a key fob, which was used by a lot of people in the area that I grew up, and one of them was given to me, already in the state in which we see him here. I like the fact that he is vulnerable, protected by the Black Madonna. Were it hotter in here, the tar that she is made of would start to melt, changing the smooth surface. So, she is in a vulnerable state herself, as are we. The Black Madonna in its African American iteration comes from a specific soil, grown in a specific culture. That is why you need to read the poems you construct from the back of the books in the library out loud. You need to create and feel the rhythmic cadence; it will create something that protects you and the Madonna.

DC: *There seems to be a strong personal element in this show. One light installation with bathroom tiles on the ground is entitled My Mother Was a Bathroom Believer.*

TG: Yes, that is true, there are a lot of personal memories incorporated in this show. This is how I grew up, surrounded by a lot of strong black women and, of course, my mother, who used to lock herself up in the bathroom to pray, the only place she could find some rest from her kids. I take these personal references, these memories and try to connect them to a collective history, so I would argue that these exhibitions are at the same time personal and interconnected to different histories in different places.

DC: *In the Musei Capitolini in Rome, there is a sculpture of Artemis of Ephesos. It is a Roman copy from the 2nd century of a Greek sculpture from the 2nd century B.C. This goddess was thought of as having raised Zeus in a cave on honey. The Roman copy has a body made of white marble, but the face and hands are blackened bronze. When Maerten van Heemskerck—whose painting of a Madonna you have chosen from the collection of the Kunstmuseum Basel as a juxtaposition for your show there—depicted the Artemis Temple of Ephesos, he modeled the building after Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Thus, linking the Black Madonna of the Romans to his contemporary cult of Mother Mary.*

TG: What you are saying is that the Madonna cult in Europe has pre-Christian roots. So do we, of course. Egypt may figure so prominently in black churches for different reasons; one of the aspects of Egyptian culture that always fascinated me is the fact that they didn't have words for black or light-skinned, you were an Egyptian or not, that was what mattered, nothing else. But this convergence of different ideas in a common world history fascinates me, and I think that is one of the reasons that the figure of the Black Madonna is so relevant. It is connecting different cultural spheres through female aspects, which is a given, that cannot be stressed enough. One might actually argue that the pictures of women in the Johnson archive are embedded within these long arches of historical representation. On one hand, they are Black Madonnas; on the other, they are also Egyptian goddesses.



Theaster Gates, *Black Madonna Press With King And Believers*, 2012/2018. Museum of Contemporary Art Basel,
Photo Credit: Julian Salinas

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