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**“Scaling Up – Local densities and Global Arts Circulations”**

**Organised by: Mónica de Miranda**

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I want to start by apologising for the ‘very serious’ nature of this presentation. This ‘seriousness’ is one of my only weapons in dealing with the predominant narratives of how the arts merge into the overwhelming forces of financial, commercial and legal globalisation. This particular form of ‘seriousness’ has to do with the fact that I am trying to think about two sets of problematics together. And so, it emerges from the effort to frame the thinking process, rather than to identify an issue and comment on it.

The first problematic concerns a certain postcolonial understanding of globalisation that charts an ongoing hegemony of cultural/political domination and the exploitation of resources. The other has to do with an attempt to think through global art circulation and to ask whether it is, at all, possible for things to be truly known outside their own context. Bringing together these two really different bodies of thought, makes it impossible to talk about the art world ‘on its own terms’. This idea of the art world ‘on its own terms,’ framed by concepts of value and regard, of financial investments, of reputations established on the basis of international prominence, privileges a market logic, thus obliterating what I call ‘local densities’. It contributes to absolutely nothing, except to particular forms of navel-gazing and self-absorption, which feed into notions of a unique economy not held to any other critical analysis. Instead, I am trying to consider what I see around me as forms of artistic circulation through other bodies of thought, about advanced capitalist practises and certain kinds of postcolonial states. What I am trying to do is to think of art and postcolonial conditions away from their discourses in order to make them engage as non-representational practises. By this, I mean that art does not illustrate the conditions, and such conditions should not become the explanatory context for art.

Thus, this discussion deals with a particularly contemporary phenomenon. What happens to the locally dense knowledge that scholars, activists, and artists have researched and produced, experienced and performed in distant locations around the globe? What happens once it begins to circulate globally and is celebrated as insightful knowledge? At this late stage of the postcolonial world, local knowledge is not simply a regionally varied version of a mainstream hegemonic knowledge. It is a situated knowledge, organised through different imperatives, achieved through different protocols, instantiated by different structures. The infrastructures that sustain such activities vary greatly. Classrooms across the world are not similar or equal; neither are libraries, museums or archives or cultural policies. And this inequality is not simply a question of distribution of means and privileges. If we think of this set of differences beyond an evaluative model that upholds a standard for what is sufficiently ‘good’ – away from international standard – we achieve other forms of appreciation and communion. We might, instead, have a chance to consider the differences in how and why people produce knowledge and to recognise that it is virtually impossible to reproduce it for immediate consumption in some other location.

This is the dilemma that I am trying to think about: that you cannot simply transplant knowledge and cultural practises that come from such different trajectories, and think that they might just be able to signify somewhere else. But it is not as simple as I have posed it either – for culture always radiates outwards, travels and connects, but such fluidity does

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not presume instant comprehension and effective translation. To unpack the question, opens the Pandora's box of complexity that is particular to disciplines and practises, to an understanding of 'research' and 'context' and 'example' within the curatorial sphere, and that promises what it cannot deliver. We cannot bring this dense knowledge along, lay it out, and assume that it can find an interpretative community in its new location.

In addition, I am trying to think about global art circulation operating either through market logics – the system of art fairs and galleries, international exhibitions, publications, and so on – or through the cultural diplomacy of nation states that send out exhibitions or construct national pavilions to represent them.

In each case there is an underlying desire to bring the world to an audience that feels the need to be informed. This is the logic by which art works are circulating. But it is a logic that assumes universal equality around art. Equally it assumes that art is a universal signifier that it will mean the same wherever in lands., by virtue of its universal comprehensibility. This is the great dilemma: art should not operate as a context, or as a lesson on somebody else's conditions, or as a native informer on tragedies of the 'other'. That is not what art is meant to do; it is meant to do something transformative to both the conditions and the modes for their comprehension. And yet the mechanisms that might convey those conditions are not available because of this universalising, flattening effect that artistic circulations have. I am trying to think about how to work with that, against that, and to see what tools I have to regain the complexity that is flattened out when art becomes an imported commodity that is supposed to tell you something about Mexico or Russia, or any other global hotspots of concern, when it is perceived as a form of consumption or of cultural tourism. It is not a question of building a better context for work – we have to deal with things at the heart of the problem. The heart of the problem is a universalism that assumes that culture can transcend the conditions of its production and the effects it has on different places as it is exposed. The concept is that if it is good enough, powerful enough, persuasive enough, it will transcend the conditions of its production and equalise the responses of its audiences.

How, then, do we think of conditions as entry points into knowledge production at a planetary level? People around the globe are subject to containment, confinement, slavery, flight and expulsion. And I am borrowing the concept of 'expulsion' from economics, following Saskia Sassen. Those living in such conditions are largely considered the subjects of the representation of knowledge, rather than the producers. If we continue to look at this problematic from the privileged standpoint of high cultural circulation – exhibitions, conferences, publications, gatherings, studentships, residencies and subsidised cultural practises – we are not dealing with the different points of access into practices around the globe. All of these forms of circulation are humanistic efforts at creating a certain kind of level playing field.<sup>1</sup>

Two perspectives, in particular, have given us the understanding that in the so-called post-colonial, we are not dealing with deterioration of access, but with completely different and parallel trajectories. Saskia Sassen converges her arguments around the notion of expulsion, claiming that in the expanding space of advanced capitalism in the past 20 years, we have moved from the original colonial model of conquest and seizure to a contemporary mode of systemic incorporation around the globe, notably through modes of contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Saskia Sassen, 'Beyond Inequality: Expulsions', *9th Annual Conference: Philosophical Foundations of Economics and the Good Economy: Individual Values, Human Pursuits, Self-Realization and Becoming*, session 5, September 2011 (Columbia University, New York), 22.

financialisation. She characterises these modes as expulsions: 'Logics of extraction, debt as a disciplining regime, new global frontiers of finance. These depend on so-called financial innovation'.<sup>2</sup> Financial innovation is the production of new financial commodities. The sub-prime markets that created the mortgage crisis of 2007-8 are but one example. Sub-prime markets were a new financial product, Clearing Banks would hand out mortgages to unsecured borrowers, investment banks could package them as a financial commodity, so these mortgages were no longer a relationship between a customer and a bank/loaning facility, but a financialised product traded by investment funds. The shorting of stocks, so as to benefit from their failure, a practice that arose over the last decade, is another example. Instead of investing in a stock, you bet on a stock that is going to fail and what you get is a commodity that is independent from its operations (an American film called *The Big Short* is one of the best ways to understand what financial short-selling is doing.)<sup>3</sup> Let me quote Sassen again expounding on her notion of 'Expulsion' as a wide ranging component of economic-social life: 'People are expelled, devastated neighbourhoods are expelled, sharp increases in displaced people, poverties and deaths from curable diseases are part of these mechanisms of expulsion. The expulsion of people that turns space back into territory with its diverse potential'.<sup>4</sup>

Expulsion also has to do with the way in which multinational corporations purchase tracts of land to make them productive. Those corporations then expel the people who live on those lands in order to undertake resource extraction – mining, petrol, gas – whatever the raw material on offer. This is not the colonial system of conquest, this is not about the conquest of somebody else's land; instead, states deliver their territory to multinational financial interests that incorporate them into the global multinational financial system. It is a very, very different kind of process. We see it at work with art institutions as well. This means that when we think of the circulation of such entities as the Guggenheim in Bilbao, in Helsinki, etc., or The Louvre, The British Museum in the Gulf – we need to think about these projects not simply as the exploitation of local resources by multinational corporations, but also the exploitation of local aspirations as resources for their own expansion. In the process numerous financial components are stitched into an overall cultural canopy: labour exploitation, usurping local resources for multinational needs, solving storage issues, expanding brand recognition, etc.

Equally in the art world we see the same kind of 'land to territory' that Sassen describes, rendering culture ripe for investment and for financialisation, i.e. the degree to which certain kinds of territories being handed over to multinational financial interests of the art market. For example, in London we have the 'Frieze effect', or the 'Tate effect'<sup>5</sup>. These places – these Friezes, these Tates – are multinational financial corporate interests to which certain kinds of territories are handed, and we have to understand that this is how they are operating along the principles of expansion. They are never operating on the basis of exclusion, it is always about incorporation: art works, collections. Patronage, investment are brought in and incorporated into the system thereby affecting an instant financialisation, what might have been a representation of a national culture to a patron, becomes a valued

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<sup>2</sup> Sassen, 'Beyond Inequality', 4.

<sup>3</sup> *The Big Short* (23 December 2015), dir. Adam McKay, *Paramount Pictures*.

<sup>4</sup> Sassen 'Beyond Inequality', 23.

<sup>5</sup> The notion of 'effect' in the case of a museum was first articulated by Jean Baudrillard in 'The Beaubourg-Effect: Implosion and Deterrence' *October*, trans. Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, 20 (Spring 1982): 3-13.

commodity within a market dependent on museum incorporation for rising value. Inclusion has similarities with expulsion. Expulsion of people turns a 'place' (with a history and an identity) back into 'territory' with a diverse economic potential. The territory is a wide-open space ripe for investment and for incorporation. Any kind of investment can take place in it. Once it is handed over to large-scale financial interests, the law of the country cannot protect the territory in the name of the nation state. And here the legacies of colonial structures and power relations are taken up in compensation, enacted through belated and ceremonial inclusion.

Achille Mbembe has argued that these are 'the after-effects of empire'. He argues that the after-effects of empire are found in the articulation of late modern colonial occupation, through new forms of the disciplinary, the biopolitical and the 'necropolitical'. The 'necropolitical' is Mbembe's term for the experience of life in contemporary Africa, the forms of the subjugation of life to the power of death. Mbembe has written a series of really interesting essays, one of them titled 'Necropolitics'<sup>6</sup> and the other 'At the Edge of the World'.<sup>7</sup> He talks about the after-effects of empire, on the one hand, and of the dominance of global financial discipline imposed by the IMF, by the World Bank, by international agencies, etc., and of the way in which nation states do not deal with one another, but deal with multinational corporations. This is one facet of what he calls 'necropolitics', or the subjugation of life to the power of death. Mbembe asserts that we have moved from a binary opposition of life /not life, or life and death as a binary, to death and death. The regimes that control life in Africa today – economic life, resource management, the movement of people – are creating a 'necropolitical' culture, the subjugation of life to the power of death. Mbembe here says: 'Thus, biopower is sufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation in which new and unique forms of social existence, in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life, confer on them the status of the living dead'.<sup>8</sup>

When you start reading widely in the most critical and imaginative thinking about globalisation, you begin to understand that the language that dominates this discussion is the language of flows and circulation. Everything flowed and circulated, and that created markets, global markets, labour forces, the movement of goods, people and value. In response to this, we are currently witnessing the emergence of a really interesting and powerful critical language, a language that talks about necropolitics, a language that talks about those that were expelled, which begins to produce a possibility or at least, one hopes, a possibility for another political base from which we might think the global in a different way. There are many emergent languages for these processes. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, for example, have called them 'Dispossessions'.<sup>9</sup> They discuss how 'human bodies have become materialised and dematerialised through histories of slavery, colonization, apartheid, capitalist alienation, immigration and asylum politics, post-colonial liberal multiculturalism, gender and sexual normativity, securitarian government and humanitarian reason.' In the face of these forces, how do we begin to take up questions

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<sup>6</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 12:1 (Duke University Press, Spring 2003), 11-40.

<sup>7</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa', trans. Steven Rendall, *Public Culture* 15:1 (Duke University Press, Winter 2000), 259-28.

<sup>8</sup> Mbembe, 'Necropolitics'.

<sup>9</sup> Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler, *Dispossession the performative in the political* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2013).

about the circulation of artistic practices which seem so minor and so frivolous, so endlessly self-preoccupied within the larger picture of deprivations?

My question is, if we came at it from another perspective, another angle, would it operate in a less frivolous, less privileged, less self-preoccupied way? Would we be able to re-potentialise the field of the global movement of art, in a way that doesn't serve all of the entities that we know it serves – art markets, cultural diplomacy, and so on – the endless avatars of territorialisation. Because I live in London, I operate in the shadow of the Tate, and I can take it up as a test case for larger neo-liberal tendencies within cultural policy. A few years ago, I was at a conference in Amsterdam called *What is a post-colonial exhibition?*<sup>10</sup> The director of the Tate at the time, Chris Dercon, walked onto the stage. First, he did a 'CEO of a multinational corporation' talk – in which he said, I cannot remember the numbers: '7 million visitors, 22 million views, blah blah blah.' Then he said, 'The Tate realises that it has gaps in its collection and therefore it has now put in a lot of effort into filling those gaps.' In other words, the gaps are not a product of global politics, of 200 years of global politics – they are just gaps. Oversights, maybe. Even more interesting than this term, 'gaps', is how they are filling these gaps; they are forming committees of people from formerly colonised countries who are rich collectors, and they are asking them to facilitate the buying of works from their countries for the Tate. They are using a colonial form of consciousness in which there is some belief that to have these works in London is more important than to have them in Lagos or any other place of origin. So, instead of that money going to all those places, to build institutions and structures, and so on, all based in a belief about superior Western infrastructure. If you buy the work for us, according to this logic put forward to patrons, we will research it, care for it, and it will be added to the collection of international art and have an audience of millions of people.

That is the story, and that is the kind of pressure that is put on the work itself and on those enabling its movement. Even more interesting, once these collections are built up, they are rarely shown because they ultimately need to be there so there will not be any gaps in the collections that pretend to a universality. In the end, they are more about a legitimating narrative of a complete collection that has global representation than about an experience of transcultural viewing. Once these works arrive, the Tate puts on an exhibition by a historical figure from that area, so an extremely old Egyptian painter becomes the line of historical development for whatever contemporary art from Egypt has been added to the collection. Which is to say, part of the infrastructure is the ability to historicise, right?: 'we recognise that you have a history and we can take the responsibility for historicising your art'. This is the logic of incorporation at work.

When you look very carefully, you see that certain art institutions are becoming global, both in their collections and in how they relate to the market. Frieze is now a global art fair with several iterations worldwide, an art magazine, a school, and a summer school. Someone gave me a list of the current 11 Frieze formats. I have misplaced the list, but it did give me a sense of an expansionist market policy like few in the art world. For example, they organise the duplication of a highly profitable and high-profile event in London to locations that wish to take up the operations of the brand in order to jump-start peripheries of central arts activities. All the while serving as a clearing house for the numerous activities of the art world: buying, selling, exhibiting, researching and publicising. This is the logic behind

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<sup>10</sup> Stedelijk Office Amsterdam, 'What is a "Post-colonial Exhibition"?', Conference (25 May 2012, Amsterdam) <https://framerframed.nl/en/blog/symposium-what-is-a-post-colonial-exhibition/>.

multinational corporations that link together resources, markets, labour, branding, advertising, and merchandising.

We need to mobilise an analysis of what Mbembe calls ‘the after-effects of empire’<sup>11</sup> to understand the relation between late capital and the legacies of colonialism and empire. Because otherwise we cannot understand the reach of markets. The tens of millions of pounds that are being poured into the Tate collection committees, from the Middle East and North Africa, from India, from Brazil, from Mexico and by Russian expatriates, would have no meaning without a colonial history. It is the colonial history that gives them the resonance that is now financialised and capitalised.

In the face of these forces, these ceremonies of inclusion and representation, how do we begin to take up questions about the circulation of artistic practices, which seem so minor and so frivolous, so endlessly self-preoccupied within the larger pictures of deprivations? Anthropologist Anna Tsing’s work provides helpful insight for my questions. Tsing says ‘capitalism, science and politics all depend on global connections. Each spread through aspirations to fulfil universal dreams and schemes. Humanist universalism values connection but does not study it – it just presumes that it exists through flows and circulation’.<sup>12</sup> This is the problem with flows and circulation. They never stand still for enough time to be studied, there is constant movement and that movement is always aimed at further production of goods or production of knowledge. Tsing notes, ‘yet, this is a particular brand of universality. It can only be charged and enacted in the thick materiality of practical encounters.’<sup>13</sup> Building on Tsing, I would argue that the actual artistic work or knowledge being produced is the ‘sticky materiality of practical encounters.’ This would mean removing it from the many ways in which it is framed when it is in the museum. The museum will always inform visitors of the proper name, the proper name of the country, the proper name of the region, the proper name of the style. Therefore, this conversation about the sticky materiality of the encounters challenges us. How can we produce that sticky materiality of encounter within art spaces? Is that a possibility? How do we start thinking about that?

We in London, as in other major cities, have been subjected in recent years to a long line of what I would call ‘discovery voyage exhibitions’. I will provide some titles: *Indian Highway*<sup>14</sup>; *Beyond the Veil*; *Post-Communist This and That*; *Awakening Latin America; Mexico* (at the Royal Academy). And the list goes on and on. I have several dozens of these in mind when I invoke this genre of exhibitions. Such exhibitions are, seemingly, offering insights into local histories, into production, sensibilities and conditions but, actually, they play a part in a transition in the international art market in which these places are becoming increasingly important consumers and patrons of the arts. And they are as much invested in linking potential diasporic patrons to local institutions, as I describe above, as they are committed to the actual exploration of what is taking place elsewhere. The emphasis is on easy access, the illusion of specific information, but not on what it stands for. And, most of all, these exhibits duplicate the market emphasis on circulation. The speed and breadth of circulation begins to stand in for familiarity, for concern, for being better informed but without an immersion in the struggles of the places being so ‘visited’.

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<sup>11</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press: 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–18.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> *Indian Highway*. 10 Dec 2008-22 Feb 2009, Serpentine Gallery, London.

My question is: what do we have at our disposal to understand this circulation that does not fall into fallacies of the easy consumption of such 'elsewheres'? For myself I would like to offer three possible theoretical ways of addressing the problematic. I do not want to go straight into possible practices because I have a sense of really needing to dismantle the language and flesh out concepts before I can start inventing other practices. I want to go through three theoretical models that allow me to think about this problematic in a slightly different way.

The first model was articulated by geographer and urbanist Neil Smith, in thinking about what he called 'jumping scale'.<sup>15</sup> 'Jumping scale' is a concept that is quite prevalent in urban geography and has to do largely with neighbourhoods in urban environments, with scales of density within different kinds of metropolitan formations. Here, Smith used a spatial concept, scale, to think about how exceptional, micropolitical situations – for example the homeless in the context of New York urban politics – could possibly jump scale and become bigger and further reflect a situation as a whole. In this case the inflation of property prices driving gentrification, the dissolution of traditional urban communities, the exile of local services, etc., were all at issue. The interesting thing about jumping scale is that it is not about becoming bigger. Linguistically that is what it sounds like, but it is not. Jumping scale is about how you take a microcosm of a problem that is being enacted locally, and scale it up so that it can address other problems.

Smith did a really interesting project with artist Krzysztof Wodiczko on a place in downtown New York called Tompkins Square Park.<sup>16</sup> Historically, it has always been a place for the homeless but it was also a place for numerous radical protests of different kinds, different groups, protesting about things happening in the city. It was an open space and it is a very old place, developed by city planning in 1823; it has a particular traditional role within the history of New York. When Rudi Giuliani was mayor of New York he wanted to remove all homeless people from the city – nobody knows where he put them – he basically bussed tens of thousands of homeless people out of Manhattan and as part of that they also shut down Tompkins Square Park. The city locked it and no one could go in. In response, Wodiczko and Smith did a very interesting multi-layered project. Wodiczko did one of his classic projections on all the buildings around the square – it was somewhat over the top, I think – he used the language of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, rebels with sub-machine guns and sandbags, but it was projected on all the buildings around the square. Neil Smith – I do not know how he managed to do this – went into the square, and he put up an enormous billboard with a timeline on it. It was very simple, just a timeline of what had happened in Tompkins Square Park from 1823 to the present. He rewrote the history of Tompkins Square Park as a place of the only consistent political protest in New York city across 150 years of urban development. How did he 'jump scale' in this instance? He took a local crisis, the closing of Tompkins Square Park and the evacuation of the homeless from the city, and he scaled it up and made it about a particular urban history of protest which now too was 'unhomed', expelled from the city's own awareness of its history. And he staged these in tandem with virulent local protests against the closure by local inhabitants. This is what 'jumping scale' is – taking a particular set of specific and local circumstances and making them speak up to a larger and more abstract set of issues. When you say scaling up, it

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<sup>15</sup> Neil Smith, 'Contours of Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale'. *Social Text* 33 (Duke University Press, 1992): 60 (54-81).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*: 59.

sounds like you are trying to make something bigger. But that is not the case, it is about a sliding scale between something small, specific and local and something large and general.

In Neil Smith's words: we 'jump scale' to organise the production and reproduction of daily life, and to resist oppression and exploitation at a higher scale, over a wider geographical field. The chants of the protesters in Tompkins Square Park expressed the same ambition. From the immediate retort: 'Whose park is it? It's our fucking park' the chant changed in the first days of defending the park to: 'Tompkins Square Everywhere'. In this way it becomes an instance and a reference for a whole set of urban protests elsewhere as well. Smith continues: 'The struggle was defeated precisely at the point where it failed to mobilize tenants, housing activists, and homeless people citywide. Put differently, jumping scales allows evictees to dissolve spatial boundaries that are largely imposed from above and that contain rather than facilitate their production and reproduction of everyday life'.<sup>17</sup>

Where are the political debates over the scale at which neighbourhoods are constructed, the boundaries of the urban, what makes a region, the scale of the nation state, or indeed, what constitutes the global scale? Is it that such debates have never occurred? They have, although they have generally been obscured. As such, the division of the world into localities, regions, nations, and so forth, is essentially taken for granted so that the relation between scales within the urban, of local to municipal, for example, are simply assumed.

To counter this involves several shifts in thinking. First, recognising the construction of geographical scale, is a primary means through which spatial differentiation takes place. Second, an understanding of geographical scale might provide us with a more plausible language of spatial difference. Third, the construction of scale as a social process, i.e. scale is produced in, and through, societal activity, which in turn produces and is produced by geographical structures of societal interaction. And fourth, the production of geographical scale is the site of potentially intense political struggles. This is how an urban geographer such as Neil Smith introduces the notion of jumping scale. If we start thinking about the way in which, within a Western cultural landscape, we receive either the practices or the knowledge productions of elsewhere, it is always, in what he says, leaving it with the understanding of local, regional, national, etc. The possibility of allowing it to address a set of problems that we share beyond those categories, is the only way of allowing it to jump scale.

This is a genuinely complicated process in the sense that you have to do the work of disabusing yourself of all of the obvious solutions to the problem of communicating across regional/cultural/linguistic differences.

Some years ago, I curated a very large exhibition of a Turkish video and image artist, Kutlug Ataman, in Antwerp. I learned that the city has a very large migrant Turkish population. I thought 'I will take this quite heretic and quite anarchic Turkish artist and I will connect him to the migrant population of Antwerp and this is how I will "jump scale."' It was the silliest idea ever. They were absolutely not interested in him and he was absolutely not interested in them and the mutual common ground of a 'Turkey' showed itself to be the empty identarian signifier that it is. The whole effort was a ridiculous failure, but like all failures, very, very important, because it made me face the realisation that *that* kind of notion – that we will connect problems in Turkey with problems of Turkish migrants in Western Europe – is precisely *not* how you jump scale. On the other hand, the use of incredibly specific local instances that Ataman makes in his work in terms of issues of sexuality, or in terms of abjection, offer a whole set of focuses that one can scale up. What

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



was impossible to do under the aegis of a national identity, because no one actually inhabits a national identity, became more possible in thinking through the embedding of sexuality, or of poverty, or of lack of agency in specific narratives that are always developing beyond identity, which is the great strength of Ataman's work. A moment of recognition of Anna Tsing's 'sticky materiality' is here at play. So, it is very interesting to think about all of the work you have to do in order to let go of what constitutes a context for work. I find that I can only do it on a trial and error basis. I cannot locate the exact proven approach, the right approach, because it is not there yet. So, this is one term, 'scaling up', that we can use to think differently about what work this circulation of art can do.

The second term I would like to borrow from Guattari's preoccupation with 'micropolitics', grounded in Deleuze and Guattari's broader understanding of biopower.<sup>18</sup> Micropolitics refers to small-scale interventions that are used for governing the behaviour of large groups of people. Recent definitions of micropolitics, developed by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, argue that micropolitics is a type of political regulation involved in shaping the preferences, attitudes and perceptions of individual subjects. Micropolitics contributes to the formation of desire, belief, inclination and judgment in political subjects. Its regulations take place at local and individual locations, in places such as prisons, hospitals, and schools. But also in films, exhibitions, and other arenas for expressing desire through culture. In Deleuze and Guattari's thesis 'those who evaluated things in macro-political terms, understood nothing of the event, because something unaccountable was escaping.'<sup>19</sup> They propose assemblage as the term of a new topology at the centre of micro-political dynamics. Every assemblage is connected with other assemblages, in a specific way, without one determining the others. What we have in the notion of micropolitics is very similar, I think, to a jumping scale argument. We have a series of highly specific assemblages of knowledge and experience, as in a series of films or in the culture of the prism, that then connects to other assemblages and together produce a completely unframed notion; unframed in the sense of disconnected from the given name of the nation, the State or the kind of governance that society is under.

One of the important questions is how do we, in the world of cultural production, get away from the dichotomy that says 'here we are a democracy' and 'there', referring to the people being represented in an exhibition, they are a non-democratic society, totalitarian or under a military regime or tribal, or whatever. The trouble with this binary understanding of forms of governance is that it cannot capture everything that is happening in the field. It immediately creates an opposition: this form of governance versus that form of governance – or our experience – defined as more democratic, more open, more representative – versus that experience – constructed as less open, more oppressed, less accountable. When we start thinking about the micropolitical, what we have is assemblages speaking to assemblages. So, in a way, this is a form of jumping scale, but slightly different because it is more lateral, it is more transversal. Less captive to a mental model that determines that here is the small part of a recognisable bigger whole (neighbourhood vs. municipality vs. state). Micropolitics models operate differently than jumping scale, in breaking down the local versus global binaries we use to discuss the circulation of art and art practises. They are not vehicles of translation, how to translate the local into the national or transnational

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<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Robert Brinkley, 'What is a Minor Literature?', *Mississippi Review* 11:3, Essays on Literary Criticism (Winter/Spring 1983): 13-33.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

scale, but rather a concept of aggregates, an aggregation of instances that, joined together, produce something larger but not totalising.

A really great book by Suely Rolnik and Felix Guattari called *Micropolitical Revolution in Brazil*<sup>20</sup> records the conversations they had, as they travelled across Brazil, and spoke with groups of people who were gathering together – groups of psychoanalysts, urban activists, and workers in different sectors. The book is really a reproduction of those conversations, a form of aggregation without a driving argument. It offers an amazing panorama of different voices and this is what they claim for the micropolitical revolution in Brazil. It is not a change of regime, not a top-down change but an aggregation of many different conversations stemming from many different fields of endeavour that come together and produce a sea-change within the culture.

Perhaps you are familiar with the work of Elizabeth Povinelli and the Karrabing Film Collective. Povinelli is an anthropologist, based in the US and, together with a group of indigenous people in the Northern Territory of Australia, she started the Karrabing Film Collective. It is a really great example because, on the one hand, its positioning is intricate and elusive – who is shaping and driving the project, who is the subject and what is the object, is never easily graspable. On the other hand, the work is receiving significant attention in the current art world. In every major city, everywhere in the world there are screenings of Karrabing's work.<sup>21</sup> I have actually seen several of these screenings and they are really complex and difficult because they are about really harrowing experiences of people who are so abject, and so minoritised that they do not even have the possibility of a dialogue with any kind of central power. They are equally difficult and complex as they are the product of an intricate set of internal dialogues between a highly sophisticated intellectual, and a group of people whose very difficult living conditions cannot be transcended. Taken together, it means that the pathway to making a film, is one of the subtle negotiations and numerous unspoken perceptions. I do not think I fully understand what this is doing in the mainstream international art world. In my view, the situation that becomes legible around this presence, not the final product, is what we need to think. It is never the final product that does the work. But in the art world it is always the final product that is assumed to be doing the work. What really interests me in Povinelli's work with Karrabing Film Collective is all the references that come into the work, from different parts of the world, historical moments, and using different discourses. For example, one such reference was to Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. This model of theatre started playing a part in the Karrabing film-making process as a way to consider the relation of conditions and representation. This is why I find the world of Povinelli and others with the Karrabing Film Collective to be an interesting entry point. Its specificity of the grim conditions of life for indigenous people, in the Northern territory of Australia, is refracted through a set of global references taken up as vehicles for the expression and representation of dissent.

Here is a quote from a conversation that appeared on e-flux, between Elizabeth Povinelli and a couple of other collaborators, among them her co-director Liza Johnson. In their discussion they describe a micropolitical structure. Elizabeth Povinelli: 'These film projects began as something quite different than what they ended up being. I talked a little about this in an earlier e-flux journal essay. A very old group of friends and colleagues of mine

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<sup>20</sup> Guarrai and Suely Rolnik, *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, trans. Karel Clapshow and Brian Holmes, (Semiotext(e), 2008).

<sup>21</sup> *Karrabing Film Collective: Salt water Dreams*. Tate Modern. Screening 28-29 October 2017, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/film/karrabing-film-collective-saltwater-dreams>.

were working on a digital archive project, that would be based in the community where they were living. But after a communal riot, they decided being homeless was safer than staying in the community. So what began as a digital archive that would be located on a computer in a building in a community was reconceptualized as a “living archive” in which media files would be geotagged in such a way that they could be played on any GPS-enabled smart device, but only proximate to the physical site the media file was referring to’.<sup>22</sup> It could not be played in another country but only in proximity to the physical site to which the media file referred. Povinelli continues: ‘We thought this augmented reality-based media project would have two main interfaces, one for their family and one for tourists. And they thought this would be a way of supporting their specific gerontology – their way of thinking about land and being — and create a green-based business to support their families’.<sup>23</sup> Then Liza Johnson adds: ‘I had collaborated with an anthropologist in the past, and when we finished the project, he was very quick to claim mastery over the content, relegating me to the form side of the equation, as if the two could be easily separated. And as if you can have mastery over content when that content is itself a group of living people who have mastery over themselves!’<sup>24</sup>

Within art contexts, sometimes, this split has formal implications too, most obviously between a representational paradigm that may aim to generate shifts in meaning or ideology, and a public art, or relational aesthetics paradigm that may think of social relationships as the material and medium of the work. But is it not possible to gesture in both directions? Cinema and theatre offer a lot of models that we could aspire to, including: Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*;<sup>25</sup> the kinds of participatory projects that Jean Rouch made and that Faye Ginsberg champions; classical and contemporary forms of neorealism; and even in the legacies of minimalism, like Akerman and Warhol, for the ways that eventfulness and the everyday are distributed. I have been very interested in Lauren Berlant’s project, including her characterisation of the cinema of precarity, and in Ivonne Marguelies’s work on realism, and especially on the role of description in creating a kind of critical purchase on eventfulness. These references, in conversation with a set of references traditional to the Karrabing mob, were the basis of the workshop that we did with the Karrabing. We fundamentally aspired to Boal: what are the conflicts of everyday life, and how might we act upon those conflicts if we try to act them out?

These are models that, for me, have the value of always pulling away from the finished product. Smith, Guattari and Povinelli all talk about processes that are not in advance of the finished product but that are ongoing. It is the processes they are interested in, they are meeting around the assemblages of different kinds of knowledge. One of the things that I really like about looking at all the people who are involved with Karrabing, is that none of them has a final goal in mind. They do not think ‘Oh it’s going to be a film and that film can then go to a film festival or distribution, or museums around the world’. Instead they think ‘we’ll bring this and this together and then we’ll see what happens’. And then the art world gets hold of it and it becomes a commodity. So how do we constantly dial back, basically? To a moment before the clarity of a product?

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<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Audra Simpson and Liza Johnson, ‘Holding Up the World, Part IV: After a Screening of When the Dogs Talked at Columbia University’, *e-flux Journal* 58 (October 2014), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/58/61151/holding-up-the-world-part-iv-after-a-screening-of-when-the-dogs-talked-at-columbia-university/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Augusto Boal, *The Theatre of the Oppressed* (Pluto Press: London, 1979).

Finally – and I know this is a really long and labyrinthine argument – but the third and final term at my disposal at this moment is Jean-Luc Nancy's 'world-making.' He differentiates between globalisation and what he calls 'world-making'.<sup>26</sup> Globalisation, according to Nancy, is the totality of things: 'totality grasped as a whole. While the other is the process of constant forming'. A process in expansion, in reference to the world of humans, of culture and of nations, in a differentiated set. 'Globalization', says Nancy, 'is the suppression of all world-forming. An unprecedented geopolitical, economic and ecological catastrophe', the world, says Nancy, 'has lost its capacity to form the world. It seems only to have gained the capacity of proliferating'.<sup>27</sup> This, again, is the kind of argument, in a completely different language, that reverberates with what I have found in Sassen. He says that 'advanced capitalism has nothing but proliferation'.<sup>28</sup> To create the world, for Nancy, is 'to immediately, without delay, reopen each possible struggle for a world that is, for what must form the contrary of a global injustice against the background of a general equivalence'.<sup>29</sup> He is opposing two things here: the global injustice against general equivalence. Equivalence, in his philosophical language, is what we were talking about earlier as the absolute flattening impact of universal humanism. Universal humanism advances a kind of flattening effect, in which everything operates in the same way. And this is what Nancy wants to reverse. There could be few better ways of understanding the oddness of endless displays of cultural products from elsewhere, their elevation to the status of both precious objects in the market sense, as well as signifying entities in the contexts of cross-cultural negotiations, than Nancy's understanding of a global injustice against the background of a general equivalence. The global injustice and lack of equality that goes into the making of these cultural entities, the conditions of their making, is completely negated in their circulation within a market of equivalences.

These are some tools for a conceptual understanding of the terrain we inhabit. Now we have the opportunity to open up, in detailed specificity, some of the practices of artistic production, intervention and advocacy, curating, and the building of infrastructures, which, I argue, combine to renew the possible struggle that Nancy aspires to in his desire for world making.

We arrive at the tail end of a complex unpacking of my problematic about the global circulation of art works, without a conclusion, and without a recipe – because I think that to be without a conclusion and to be without a recipe, is to be where we need to be. We do not need a template for a perfect, just, and balanced model of exhibiting artistic practices from around the world and we do not need to be under the illusion that this kind of practise dignifies the work or artists in any way, whatsoever, or creates a different level of understanding around the world. We do not need any of that, we need something else. What the something else is, I have no idea! It certainly has to do with the rise of new subjectivities on the world stage of politics, and it certainly has to do with research that projects backwards onto researchers. It is clearly divorced from the business of representation, and its relation to informing us is both dubious – there is no solid truth to tell – and dangerous, in view of the art world's voracious appetite for nuggets of factual information about remote places. I gravitate towards Anna Tsing's 'sticky materiality' in all

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<sup>26</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Creation of the World or Globalisation', trans. with introduction François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (State University of New York Press, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Sassen, 'Beyond Inequality', 2.

<sup>29</sup> Nancy, 'World or Globalisation'.

of its unexpected dissonances, and to Abdou Maliq Simone's narrativised accounts of minute and incomprehensible performances of seemingly insignificant acts, that he terms 'just keeping things going'.<sup>30</sup> This effort to keep things going connotes the recognition of a bigger picture, without the act of engaging with it, or opposing it, or being victimised by it – it is a form of inhabitation. My final question then is – how can we create proximity between two very different forms of 'keeping things going'? On the one hand, art world protocols and, on the other, the lived realities? Can exhibitions of 'elsewheres' become instantiations of world making, of the struggle to form a world? Asking these questions from within several forms of cultural practice, such as teaching, researching, and curating, requires that these become the site of the struggle rather than the place from which we project the struggle to elsewhere.

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<sup>30</sup> Abdou Maliq Simone, *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of endurance in an Urban South* (Polity Press, 2018).