

TECHFLANEURS AND FAKIRS: ART ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DIGITAL INNOVATION DIVIDE

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ABSTRACT | In this article we examine four international artists whose art has its origin in everyday life and its concerns. The story of this art should be rewritten in terms of a historiography of the average underprivileged person, who does not reap the benefits of a discriminatory economy. Artists discussed here, namely, Daniel Cruz (Chile), Gilbert Prado (Brazil), Kausik Mukhopadhyay (India), and Probir Gupta (India) have been creating art on the impoverished side of the digital innovation divide, within their own respective niches and horizons of belief. Discarded gadgets, scraps, broken circuits or sensors, microphones, and other junk are incorporated to create fragile but impactful installations. Junk animism and low-fi artificial intelligence often inform their work. Such artists do not inhabit traditionally-defined borders of nation, class or identity; rather, they inhabit spaces across fault lines which divide and exacerbate human society from within. Cruz' Surfonic, for example, operates on internet gateways that fall outside the reach of global communications industries, while Mukhopadhyay uses scrap or junk media for his installations. These artists' commitment to an art of voluntary defeatism upends a culture of spectacle. The artist is like an underdog flaneur or technological fakir, reviving human interest against the greed and pretensions of a global art market.

KEYWORDS | global innovation divide, junk, niche art, poverty

The Historiography of Art: Whose Discourse is it?

The general practice in the contemporary historiography of art, especially in Europe and America, is to validate the kind of art preserved or celebrated in elite museums. Yet, the elite urban museum, though it functions like a repository of true culture, now stands disconnected from the anxieties and concerns of common working civilians. This is not surprising. Art conservation practices in the twentieth century, despite the breakdown of imperialism in many parts of the world, and the rise of civilian democracies, continued to be influenced by aristocratic idealism. The museum's idealism is a residue of aristocratic court culture, and its corresponding feudal or industrial alliterations in the nineteenth century.¹ What then qualified as art was commissioned by monarchs and rich collectors and evaluators. Examples of autocratically valorized artworks include the paintings commissioned from Botticelli in the sixteenth century, the extravagantly priced paintings of Monet, and the Asian arts collection of Russian

Tzars, especially Nicholas II. Historians who talk about art today are not absolved from this conformity to market-driven values. Mainstream art historians like Eric Auerbach or Erwin Panofsky refer mostly to the arts that were patronized either by the Catholic (and Protestant) Church, which was in turn funded and manipulated by aristocrats and business guilds, and by monarchs and members of the royal family who commissioned or possessed that art. The European feudal elite acquired economic prosperity over a long process of entangled imperial expansions in other parts of the world. We cannot think of these arts historically in the same way as we would think of the shamanic ritual arts that emerged as products of sustenance culture. The 'historiography' of art today, we argue, is always conditioned by the discourse of financially elite blocks and their neoliberal counterparts in capitalist societies.

The other strange paradox is that the arts have been treated with equal disregard in the wake of revolution. An inescapable nexus of wealth (power) and taste turns true art into an alienated and corrupt object, a commodity for some

handpicked connoisseurs. Like gold, art has been valued by means of artificial attribution, just as Karl Marx wrote in his *Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts* (1844), in which he suggests that art transforms itself, much like a false divinity, in a society driven by money and artificial possessions.² The Marxian trajectory in evaluation of artworks has reappeared in revolutionary regimes and dictatorships of nineteenth and twentieth centuries, even as hegemonic or nationalist governments were confronted and replaced by more democratic forces. The dialectics of a false, corrupting surplus has affected groups or individuals who experienced the effects of the concentration of wealth and privilege among an elite group. Napoleon Bonaparte adopted the same creed of art antiquarianism after assuming dictatorial power. Corruption of revolutionary democracy led to the Louvre being called the 'Napoleon museum.' This history was condemned to repeat itself in the following century. The structure of patronage in monarchies, evinced in such examples as the Asian collections of the Hermitage by Tzar Nicholas Alexander II, was retained by the Soviets after the October Revolutions. Stalin appointed Red Army operatives to control and auction Asian art items, such as those purchased by American business magnates like Andrew Mellon and Portuguese entrepreneur Calouste Gulbenkian. Transnational business in art and art trafficking is carried out across a spectrum of political ideologies. The valuation of an artwork has gradually become subject to association with financially effective appropriations. Any review of the evolving art market in communist China reveals the staggering momentum of their art trade, both in terms of sales and auctions. The stage is clearly set for the dominance of the art market by Chinese billionaires.³ The patterns of big business in art are nearly universal in a transversal global economy. Large auction houses in Beijing and in Manhattan function on similar lines of antiquarian ethics—and are not different from other art auctions and markets anywhere in the world. Business surplus is used to purchase art and re-cycle it through complex economies of conservation, ostentatious marketing and sales.

2. The Contemporary Global Art Market Systems and its Evaluations

The unavoidable power of the art market distances art from its human origin. The cultural salience of the modern museum, its *catalogue raisonné*, its stocks and displays of art, its strategies of promotions and sales, are guided by the same values as that of corporate economy, which controls funding and patronage of art objects. Artworks in contemporary societies are commissioned or appropriated, almost without exception by funds flowing in from corporate dividends or wealthy patrons who share a passion for the art market. A fraction of this funding is made available to artists in the

form of donations, scholarships, patronage and residencies. They are offered in most cases by corporate or private entities. These funds are concentrated in the hands of a few individuals who indulge in the same conceits of acquisition and display. This leaves a lacuna in the civilian's perception of art, in the formation of a cult of artistic celebrity. Artists in the industrially underdeveloped world find themselves in a more critical position, as they are globally conditioned to value the art that is already exhibited, glorified and sold in super-rich economies, where art is marketed under a plush and sophisticated museum culture. Advanced architecture, post-avant-garde styles, mind-boggling investments, and spectacular display define the reality for an art work in today's corporate world, especially digitally nuanced art and the new media visualizations that propitiate Olympics and sports and public events or conferences. This flashy reality solidifies the impression that the art exhibited in contemporary museums or formats *alone* constitutes true art. In reality, the art produced in unknown corners of the world, which is arguably as precious as any true art could be, falls outside the pale of this gaze. Academic institutions, corporate, and private interests restrict and valorize rules of endorsement, composition, and evaluation of art objects and categories. Democracy itself rests on hierarchized legal structures which protect the wealth of the upper classes, and yet turning a blind eye to questions of access and consumption for impecunious people. Art history is written within this immersive contingency of the industrial surplus, and more often its crude profits. Just as the Church functioned as a fundraiser and self-designated critic of art objects in the Middle Ages, the post-enlightenment academy now emerged as its secular counterpart. Today, the University receives funding for archival projects and the study of art, and continues to perpetrate the myth of high art in its endless cycles of reference and citation.

The assessment and celebration of art as an object of art history thus underwrites forms of hegemonic evaluations. Art history is often anaesthetically indifferent to alternative forms of art, namely poor people's art and rural or indigenous art—unless that comes back to haunt the collector's dream and hope of lucrative packaging. An analogous system of patronage informs both corporate or private formats of the museum.⁴ This applies to digital art histories and its spectatorship through global gateways.⁵ Digital art histories are promoted, anthologized and disseminated through museums and museum-based funding in a similar manner. 'Arts and Humanities' curricula across the world are organized around holdings of contemporary digital art, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York or the Ars Electronica Center in Linz, Austria. Art ontologies appear across metropolitan focal points as part of a flow of production and consumption of new media arts. The process is most clearly visible in elite Anglophone or European institutions. New media experiments at the MIT Media Lab create standards

of new media art throughout the northern transversal. In their pioneering research on new museum studies, Ryan and Sim (1990) studied the pivotal role played by media in characterizing and framing user expectations for emerging new media arts.⁶ The spectacle of 'digital art' is notched up in such urban-corporate centers, which enjoy business and corporate attention. The strength of the market in the north Atlantic seaboard, more than any other, is supported by enhanced fuel supply lines and power grids, and submarine telecommunications technology. The financial surplus is often used by private individuals and players to fabricate a gorgeous explosion of new media arts for unfolding, impressionable audiences in Asia and the Middle East.⁷ The geopolitical roots of electronic resources thus create a hierarchical territorialization of innovations. But hierarchization, and the consequent evaluation of technologically mediated art, is not necessarily confined to 'nations' or hegemonic blocks and economies. Art, especially digital art, is already promoted in terms of breath-taking exhibitions in periodically organized events like the biennales, festivals, and congresses of robotics and video games in California, Japan, or South Korea. Flashy big-data exhibitions at forums like SIGGRAPH and the Tokyo Game show intensify the demand for a digital avant-garde in the far reaches of a 'global' media culture. In the Middle East, digital and media arts pursuant to experiments and research in nanotechnologies or photonic sciences are exhibited by industrial sponsors and state patrons. Consider the Sharjah Biennale, for example. Hence, the new media arts are inextricably bonded to technology and communication in industrially advanced plateaus. Digital art cultures, mixed and splayed by the aesthetics of a global industry, captures the imagination of social and political collectives elsewhere in the world. A culture of visual extravaganza has a trickle-down effect and wields the power to seduce, overwhelm, marginalize, and abandon the peripheral market economies at its own free will. This culture defines what is emerging or trending and continuously holds marginalized people in thralls of spectacle.

3. The Politics of Self-Abnegation, Civil Rights, and Art

Even left-wing or independent art histories are inadequate in describing this alternate art. Lyotard's examples of postmodern art (like Cezanne's) are all directly taken from post-enlightenment imperial culture and its variants.⁸ Deleuze's examples, like the *Boy with Machine* by Richard Lindner (1954), offer no more than an existentialist affinity with Heidegger's ontic claims about life and art.⁹ There is less interest for the socially situated artist in Deleuze and Guattari than in the fanciful desiring machine of their imagination. Even in the dominant postmodern discourse of art the civilian-rural view of art is continually undermined. As an experimental alternative to this hegemonic order, what we could intend to

promote is the art of common civilian artists in several and remote parts of the world. Certain examples could potentially anticipate a more nondescript but essentially market-independent discourse of art. Now is the time to look at what could thrive beyond the gaze of the museum and the auction, and the cult of billionaires in a divided world. On the contrary, art historical practices, suffice to say, are based on an institutionally-blinding approach to the art object. Alternative new media art, activist art, ideological *third* theatre, dalit literature and art, or individual and regionally marginalized art practices—such as Ashanti, Huicho, or those from Latin America, India, or Africa—may be culturally embedded in their origin and doxology and yet not be recognized by the art market in Europe and America. This is a blessing and a curse at the same time. It's a curse in so far as the precious works of un-resourced artists, working with bare minimum resources, are left out and ignored by historiographic practice. On the contrary, high centric art is blessed because it is inevitably attributed by a culture of technological hierarchies and their dysfunctional economies.¹⁰

4. A Civilian Art and its Virtues

A more ethnographic view of art would probably help us identify real facts and conditions under which art is produced. Just as in ethnography we collect information around a symbol or narrative, a similar method would reveal the modest corners in which art exists and thrives in the divided world. Here, we choose a cluster of artists whose life and work reveal an unassuming and humane process of thought, one untouched by greed of big industries. Art histories may not only perpetrate the reviews, stories and reports of artwork that appear on relevant media but also on unknown art and artists and their inconsequential trivia. These stories may well relate to the underprivileged side of the digital divide. These are the stories of poorer artists, and artists without endowment and capital. What about the art of environmentally challenged people? The art of discarded and junk material? Art of the common deprived civilians in search of livelihood? The artists we have included in our discussion come from Latin America and India; but they could have come from elsewhere, so long as they engage and disengage from the seductions of global art. They are *niche* artists whose only allegiances are to the collective to which they belong. Their lives are never directly influenced by the allurements and spectacle of electronic technology achieved with large scale petabyte architectures. On the contrary, they regress to their *niche* of beauty—like Gurdjieff, or Tolstoy, rejecting the trend and the history in its entirety and uplifting the unique human being, unencumbered by ideas and cultural excreta. Certain Latin American artists were already highlighted in our previous essays on the theme (Thompson and Mukhopadhyay 2018). We recommended this historiography of a disowned civilian art in our stories of Fernando Palma

from Mexico and Rodrigo Derteano from Peru. Their digital installations take them back to their indigenous roots and naturalism.¹¹ So too does the work of Indian artists Kausik Mukhopadhyay and Probir Gupta, or the art of Latin American artists Daniel Cruz and Gilberto Prado. These artists stand like disenfranchised civilian artists on the underwritten side of a digital innovation divide. Their art does not necessarily reflect a Marxist or left-wing praxis. It inspires an apolitical response to everything good or bad in life. The best political exemplars of this style of looking at the world appear in the statements of José Mujica, the former Uruguayan President. A prototype of Gandhi or Mandela, Mujica was called the world's poorest President by the BBC. Mujica explores whether it is possible to lead a life freed from the seductions of an industrial culture, with its digital contraptions and vanities. The message of a free, uninhibited natural life alone strengthens our *habitus*. Solidarity ensured by simple life and livelihood close to nature: that is Mujica's precept for a world trapped in illusory objects. Mujica's words strangely define the spirit of artists like Mukhopadhyay and Gupta, and the civilian concerns of Cruz and Prado. What these artists do is what Mujica wishes to achieve in the world: "My lifestyle is a consequence of my wounds. I'm the son of my history."¹²

5. A New Civilian Historiography versus The Elitist Historiography of New Media

We must turn away from the tradition of writing celebrity biographies of artists: this practice makes a cult out of both the art and the artist. The West perhaps inherited this tendency from Vasari's *Portraits of the Artists*, in addition to practices of imperialistic display and imposition. Even today we refer to a work of art in terms of the artist-composer, rather than the work itself: we look at "a Titian" or "a Cezanne." A rational turn in art history should be based on critical humanity and naturalism—as opposed to individualism and corporate environmentalism—and above all, be based on broad civility. Civility implies respect for quotidian values, such as humility and simplicity, and self-abnegation as opposed to exhibitionism. A similar, almost mystical version of this ideology was recommended by the Frankfurt School in the middle of World War II. Frankfurt school philosophers drew these conclusions in the wake of fascism, pogrom, and tribal elitism. Walter Benjamin touches on the core of humanity in his comments of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin considers to be great art because of its arousal from the debris of the past. The philosopher asks: "is there not an echo of those who have been silenced in the voices to which we lend our ears today?"¹³ Today's critical analyses of race, including

those by Abdul JanMohamed¹⁴ or Enrique Dussel,¹⁵ have much in common with ethnographic analysis. These thinkers respect the civilian mooring of an artist, the poverty of his or her resources, and the suffering to which their humanity is subject in an unforgiving world. On the contrary, for the wealthy classes, art facilitates competitiveness and self-glorification. Possession of the art object is a matter of pride. A civilian art history would be committed to the civil origins of human culture. Civility would imply, etymologically, "lying within" a state or social context, as a person bonded to another in civility of conduct and love. "Civilian" implies commitment, solidarity, and unity, as opposed to greed, possession, division, and exhibitionism. There is no true well-spring of art other than this sense of commitment. The question remains if these values are maintained in today's discourse of art that is promoted by the global art market, museums, and auction houses in the developed world.

Academic research falls back on proto-imperial court culture and its mercantile or corporate extensions for democratic societies. Oxford University, for example, has published the *Oxford Art Journal* since 1978 and is deeply tied to London's museum culture. Another example is the MIT journal *Leonardo*, which engages with an apolitical discourse of technology without concern for the digital divide. Artists of all countries do not have access to similar technology. Digital culture itself remains indifferent to the inequitable distribution of technology and access. The discourse surrounding digital and new media art is an essentially hegemonic project. Exclusive technocracy creates a closed loop of consumption. This is evident in the new media culture of nations, such as those in NATO, who are allied together by industry and strategic defence initiatives. Technocracies marginalize under-developed cultures of the world, yet the raw material of technology often comes from mining and natural resource deprivation of the same cultural geographies. Reduced access to technology exacerbates this inequity in poorer economies. Deprivation, unemployment, and poverty causes intercontinental migrations of people out of these regions, and though networking technologies are imbricated in urban life, unstable population clusters cannot access these technologies. Lack of access to internet, automation, and other resources lead to unstable economies. Art journals have not responded adequately to this divide. Art criticism could promote inclusive technological creativity, but it rarely does.

6. Hierarchies of the Technological Ontologies

The evolution of "digital art" as an academic discipline is considerable in advanced economies, unlike in those that lack sufficient funding for courses and an appropriate demand in the market. Digital literacy determines how digital art can be created or sustained in a consumer culture. Digital literacy

represents a moment of anthropocenic importance in human culture, as it offers a new functional tool in human cognitive history.¹⁶ McLuhan's emphasis on digital innovation reveals a radically different epistemological knowledge structure in the world due to our abilities of coding and interfacing. Like the invention of writing scripts, or the printing press, computational memory and retrieval expanded the reach of communications in an exponential way. Our valuable take from McLuhan is that the human being is more of a *homo codices*. However, coding is also moderated by collective allegiances. Texts, scripts, codes, hardware, and clouds are like extended libraries of information for the same behavioral swarm of real life and history. No society has managed to resolve tensions between hierarchical groups with any amount of technological intervention. Fault lines form, solidify, and divide nation states from within. The horizontal cartography of political maps is undermined by vertical ecologies. The same divide is reinscribed on the map by digital literacy. The availability of technology and its cultural uses is limited to certain economic states. This dividing line in digital economies is identified by Drori:

*Attention is split between concern for the impeded access of the poor to this revolutionary technology, on the one hand, and the race to lead the world in creating the next "hot" technology, on the other. These two concerns, which have been given the pithy titles of the "global digital divide" and the "global innovation divide," are leading to two separate policy tracks, targeting the world's laggards and leaders as separate entities and operating under separate logics.*¹⁷

The contemporary digital art museum's funding, architecture, design, and culture are by-products of hierarchically exclusive clusters. The spectacle of its exhibitions make all fault lines between progress and social anesthesia ruthlessly visible.

The great divide on the American continent reveals the incomplete reach of digital technology. A comparison of the United States with Latin American countries show that the divide is more acute in the latter. But hierarchization is an interminable process that infiltrates into social life. The digital divide even appears within a country, like the United States. In his new infrastructure plan, President Joseph Biden included broadband coverage for at least 94 million Americans by 2030. Latin American nations do not have access to digital technology either and they never represent any homogenous 'Latin' or 'Hispanic' sociopolitical entity for that matter. High poverty rates force dropout in rural schools and unequal education creates fault lines in digital competencies. Poverty studies also helps expose deficiencies in supply and demand chains.¹⁸ The new "digital" arts are only apparent where e-services or broadband are adequately available for both

experimentation and consumption. The modern museum (and museological practice) in advanced countries also exposes this hierarchization within digital societies. The museum is already conditioned by art history's unconscious oblivion of the fractured and disadvantageous *habitus*. The audience inherits the same inequities of the digital divide.

7. The Real Artists on the Divide

Some artists are creating art against the tide as unassuming common citizens or civilians. Their humble medium is comprised of residue from computers and junk. They do not have an incredible amount of funding. One example is Mexican artist Fernando Palma, who combines sensors to create electronic handicrafts. Another is Kausik Mukhopadhyay, an Indian *flaneur*—or more properly a *techflaneur*—who forages scrapyards. These artists embody the norm of the lost civilian. Their junk animism co-exists with humane sensibility and a concern for nature and social life. Like Fluxus in the 1960s, their art develops from an interior reflection of the abstract and accidentally encountered material of a poor economy. The artist spends time in the street with the curiosity of a flaneur. Like an Indian *fakir*, they are both artists and critics, souls in search of aura. The street is a metaphor of lamp-posts and dim glories; the city appears like Baudelaire's cityscape, Paz's nocturnal vision of *Il Defonso*, or Neruda's unforgiving vista of blouses and underwear hanging from washing lines. This is how we define the real city of this century. It is this reality that haunts and transforms the context of Mukhopadhyay, Cruz, Prado, and Gupta's half-interactive installations. To them, the city does not need to be contorted by the glamour of laser displays. The city is merely a *zone of contact*, a trail through junk, scraps and oddments—where the homeless co-exist with a half-lost middle-class, and machines, gadgets, and debris tend to replace nature's unobtrusive presence.

This is the city that comes alive for Gilberto Prado (b. 1954). His open museum is the pedicured and leafless streets of São Paulo: the busy streets of commercial downtown are lined with hybrid, semi-intelligent trees inserted with simple sensors and arduinos. São Paulo banned the planting of more trees to avoid the leaves that accumulate after they fall and thus provoked a response for an inclusive or sustainable cityscape. Similarly, Chilean artist Daniel Cruz (b. 1975) charts the streets of Santiago, distributing intelligently mobile units, much like vending carts, to secretly catch human footfalls and conversations. His automatic self-driven carts move along pavements like dumb surveyors. Probir Gupta, a more conventional installation artist from New Delhi, India, works with neglected street children. His installations try to combine time and place with pieces of scrap technology. The street plays a key role in the process—it is a conduit like the Bosphorus that connects and divides the continents of culture. Gilberto Prado (Brazil), Daniel Cruz (Chile), Kausik Mukhopadhyay (India) and Probir Gupta (India) connected on



Figure 1. Kausik Mukhopadhyay. Looking down on Kausik Waste material installation Courtesy of the artist.

a Zoom meeting at the end of 2020. They tried to create a niche without the influence of corporations and power blocks. What unifies the artists is their openness to a journey. Their agenda cannot be disconnected from their art—at least not without compromising the essence of their art, which is the pleasure of a simple joy of life. Their art is rooted to the technosphere, *but there is no place for nonsensical fantasies of cyborgs, robots, or improbable futuristic projections*. Whereas Anglocentric academy indulges in evoking post-human fantasies, the art of Prado, Cruz, Kausik, or Probir deflates these fantasies as no more than unrealistic metaphors. For the latter, technology is in sync with human suffering. It is not an imperialist's tool or toy. Post-humanism is just another myth the Western academy has the luxury to believe. Absolute AI is both a fabrication and a failed project.¹⁹ Despite the discovery of deep learning technologies, there is no adequate hardware that could simulate the cognitive structures of real human interaction. AI is a theoretical lie and the *Anthropocene*, if it exists, continues to destroy the environment through the colonial polyphagia of markets and consumers. Against all this, these artists in the *niche continue* to shine with their humble and brilliant fusion of technology with art.

8. LATAM's Unforgiving Residues

Emerging from neo-liberal dictatorships and Soviet era scars, Latin America has been caught in industrial decline and post-Cold War dependency on polarised power

blocks. The artist Daniel Cruz deinstitutionalizes all similar metanarratives of global power and outreach in his work. Cruz' projects constitute a corrective yet an inverted lens. *Surofona* (2020) is a mobile installation, like Nam Jun Paik's *K-456* (1964), that rolls around on the streets of Santiago. The location of Cruz's art becomes important because of how the *Surofona* moves subversively against big data surveillance and secretly captures human conversation on the street. To do this, Cruz searched for unusual loci which led to his most creative and interactive pieces to be based on the street. *Remote Actions project* (2017) consists of interactive hybrids in a similar way to *Transmissions in a Mobile Cart* or *the Sound Rescue Expedition*. These cart-like installations generate online geo text with precise locations that capture specific human conversations and problems. The cart records speech fragments of people on the street and transmits it to a nodal processing unit, which is connected to other units across other locations. Dialogue concerning any theme (water scarcity, for example) is transmitted through microphones within this network. Cruz and his Argentinian colleague Bernardo Piñero generate this completely abstract network through hierarchies of affordances. Mixed dialogues are vocalized with an online radio transmission system. *Surofona, the online Latin-American Radio Network* (2020) is a more evolved version of these earlier projects. It offers an amazing alternative to intercontinental telecommunications network; a simple travelling radio captures the subaltern voice of common men and women from different places. As the technologies used are unsophisticated, subversive, and expansive, Cruz



Figure 2. Surofona, Daniel Cruz. Courtesy of the artist.

and Piñero succeed in construing this amazing labyrinth that works as surreptitiously as the network of submarine fibreoptic cables connecting the world's rich economies, only the scale is infinitesimally different. The divide between corporate networks in the northern hemisphere and the lack of similar tools in other regions, are contrasted by the discourse that *Surofona* captures and promotes. Various organizers, activists and political groups engage in *Surofona*'s radio transmissions, and sonic contaminations are allowed to incur. Discourse of such a work provokes dominant or hegemonic (corporate) discourses of the internet: questioning them, expanding them, and demonstrating greater capacity for inclusion. In 2017, Cruz and Piñero described this process:

*"It is about blending in with the environment that crosses or merge with other ones - which would then be a new source of falsehood and hypocrisy."*²⁰

Brazilian artist Gilberto Prado's art stands in opposition to state and corporate ethics. Prado's questions are: how does a city without leaves survive? Who is it really that likes to live in an ambience of artificial minimalism? The idea of the museum itself is subverted in favor of public spaces. The street, not the museum, is Prado's space for his exhibits. The dichotomies of private versus public, corporate versus democratic, imperial versus local—the "global" versus "regional" as Cruz and Piñero also call it—assume paramount significance. Prado is concerned with relational issues as well as issues of the hybridization of culture. *Mobile Trees*,

the most representative of this dichotomy, emerges on the sides of the corporate jungle of Sao Paulo. As a country torn apart by racial and economic differences, what does history look like in Brazil? In Brazil, the internet appeared in 1994 and Prado started making art amongst this emerging context. After 2002, he called his art 'digital poetics.' The group within which Prado works chose the street as a space for friction. His major works share a singular theme and the technology is never excessively sophisticated. Even in *Mobile Trees*, Prado installs a few simple circuit-controlled trees in removable tubs. Each tree is connected to sensors placed in completely different locations. These sensors receive audio signals from the environment that are transmitted to animate the tree, for it and respond to the sounds. Their movement is generated by the environment: these trees seem to be dancing as they shake off the signals to achieve reset. Bystanders are often surprised by the unexpected behavior of these self-actuating trees. Prado hybridizes his work by combining trees with technology. The comedy of trees reminds us of the loss of simplicity, music and nature. All this is achieved in the manner of a renegade mockery of contemporary life and existence. Prado has a simple set of questions:

*"What are we doing to nature? What are we doing to ourselves? It is an interesting question for me because the sonic dust that falls on the leaves of these forgotten trees reminds me of the dust that falls on us as we live in this industrial civilization."*²¹

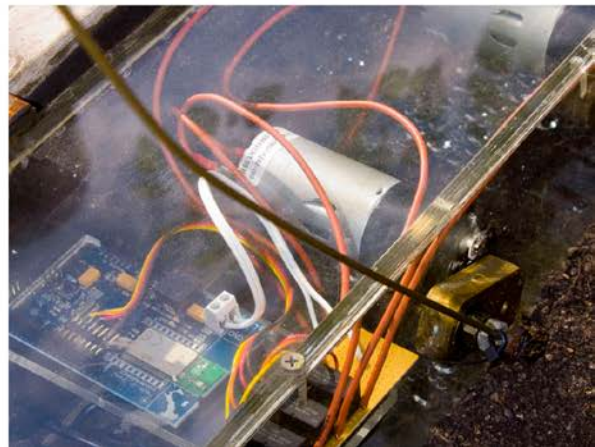
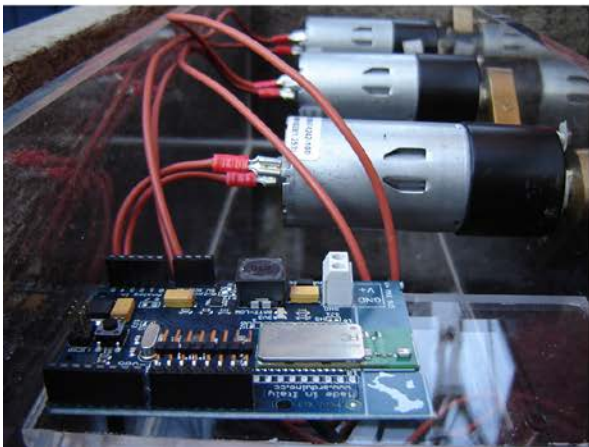
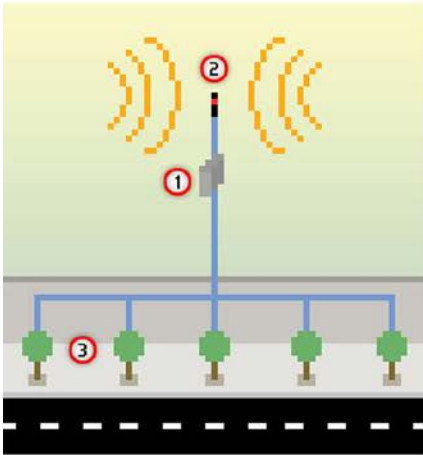


Figure 3. Gilberto Prado Amoreiras. Installation on the streets of Sao Paulo. Courtesy of the artist.

9. An Indian Story of the Innovation Divide

South Asian art history presents another paradox—the rise of technological media, against a vast spectrum of poverty and scanty privileges. Some artists have defied this false *technosphere* of the continent. Their art is left-wing or civilian. They function independently from technological affordances. Kausik Mukhopadhyay loves the scrapyards of electrical gadgets. Like Cruz, Mukhopadhyay finds salvation in this junk. Discarded electrical and electronic parts are used in his installations to bring them back to life. Like Cruz or Prado—and his contemporary Probir Gupta—Mukhopadhyay creates a new space, and a new location. Art is born from the limitless plenum of scraps and trash. Chor Bazaar, at Rabivari, Ahmedabad, literally means ‘a market of thieves or stolen parts.’ A place name that gives impulse to the self-defeating perception of this kind of art. Mukhopadhyay’s numinous art is a contemporary version of Duchamp’s ineffectual surprises. He combines scraps to create an electronic installation; like a kinetic sculpture or décor which stands out in its undecided glory. As a result, Kausik Mukhopadhyay is involved in the re-purposing of old and junk electronic parts, circuit boards, transistors, and rotors to create an “aura” of contemporary art, “if any”.²² For Mukhopadhyay the object comes from the outside and becomes art: it takes this turn for him, which is not necessarily a result of planning. The process starts with his *flâneur* like travel through vistas of scraps and junk. Walking alongside the junk market on the river in Ahmedabad, Mukhopadhyay picks and arranges these discarded objects so that they turn into something more precious and lively than how they appeared in their original form or the form in which they were first consumed. The ‘Chor Bajar’ becomes a refuge of thieves and artists who are in league with these transforming scraps. Electronic excreta may be used creatively. Mukhopadhyay reminisces similarly his inquisitive, receptive walks through the London Flea Market which he also describes with effusive affection—as the real home of the modern artist. Like Duchamp, Mukhopadhyay transforms discarded and stolen objects to pose a question. Mukhopadhyay believes in the transformative moment of these objects and perhaps unlike any other artist in recent times, and even, as Mukhopadhyay says, “unlike Picasso who taught the world to recycle junk in the most aesthetic manner possible.” Mukhopadhyay is not committed to transforming scraps into one’s own idea just as Picasso did. Mukhopadhyay asks, “What is the meaning of Duchamp’s Urinal?” suggesting that like Duchamp and unlike Picasso there is no search for reference or transcendence in electronic junk—but just a state of being, or moment, a comedy without any ritual.

Mukhopadhyay says “If I could strip the aura from the art, the artist, or even the art gallery, I think I would be relatively successful”.²³ This is a decisive act of rebellion or subversion

in which Mukhopadhyay breaks away from the modern gallery and the academy. His most important work, at least from his own testimony, is the *Tufan Mail* (2001), a wooden train made up of junk circuit boards and motors. His unassuming success from starting the train is itself an achievement and discovery. He breaks away from all discourse of art, including postmodernism, to arrive at what he calls “old school.” This is probably no school at all or at least a free school of being that marks ontological independence and freedom from assumptions. Mukhopadhyay says “I collected them [the discarded material] because I felt I had an association with them...my collections added up in...boxes and boxes...and cartloads...I enjoyed collecting”.²⁴ Mukhopadhyay’s creation of his work *Small, Medium But Not Large* (2018)—where the title itself transmits the message—is a display of three tables with circuits that operate mechanically. This is a favorite work for Mukhopadhyay, a display of gadgets containing motor wheels that start moving suddenly and at random. The humor is subversive. In a country which is far from self-sufficient in hardware development and lacks new media technologies, this kind of technological animism marks a return of the human element in art. Mukhopadhyay remembers that he loved walking through Lamington Street Market, a wholesale market for Chinese hardware. “Chinese” here suggests cheaper options and unstable technology. “Chinese circuits,” Mukhopadhyay says, “makes it difficult for an artist on the other side of the digital divide. It is difficult to experiment with cheaper material. The circuit frequently bursts—I have to start all over again.” His scale is thus ‘small’ and ‘medium’: he avoids the ‘large’—which may refer to the art of larger corporate patrimony. For the last two decades, Mukhopadhyay has not been able to produce art at all: art is not a marketable fantasy in his world, but a coincidence and evanescent dream.

The common man’s art marks a rebellion against the established canons of Indian and South Asian Art histories. Technology is a new tool but not exactly similar to its western counterpart and its new media arts. Probir Gupta’s (born 1960) *The Well is Dry* (2017) and *Underground Radio* (2019) are powerful assemblies of memory. Like the Deleuzian assembly it represents a moment in relationships between scrap parts and gadgets, but unlike the Deleuzian philosophy of a self-existential multiplanar product-in-the world, Gupta brings together memories of exile, homelessness, urban suffering in *The Well is Dry*. Each object refers to a specific memory of a suffering, within the humble niche of the artist’s livelihood. This same work may be connected to the *regiocol* consciousness, like Prado’s treeless streets of downtown Sao Paulo. Gupta is an activist and an NGO worker, and unlike the three artists discussed, has a more open agenda and a direct involvement with people on the street. He is not just a passive civilian dreamer but an activist with a purpose and a cause. Through his non-profit organization he educates children and inspires them to make art. His installations are symbols of this

same civilian concern for the world and his social companions; however, Gupta is hardly an electronic artist as he is more interested in carving installations with immense beauty and significance. We may return again and again to consider his most important works in the last decade: *The Raft* (2019), *The Wall* (2019) and the powerful *Underground Radio* (2019) which combine layers of gadgetry, microphones, amplifiers and a cascade of stuffs and disconnected parts to develop a message on the Rwandan genocide. The political messaging apart Gupta's installations expose these redactive feelings and thoughts for the spectator. The scraps that Gupta uses were often collected during morning walks and free sojourns through the city. Gupta looks and emotes like a fakir or dervish. He is a complete image of the allegory and delight of the artist: a thinker and a passionate lover of life. All these experiences spotify the sensitive and positive civilian, the artist of the niche and the future.

Conclusion

Artists across the world are creating a discourse of art that involve the common citizen, on a horizon of *niche* art. Mukhopadhyay, Gupta, Cruz, and Prado work mostly on the impoverished side of the digital divide. Their consciousness is integral to the fragile residues of a globalizing economy, and their art is conditioned by humble instruments, low-fidelity technology, discarded circuits, simplistic sensors, and microphones and remnants from electronic junk. Junk animism, or junk intelligence, co-exists with the spirituality of impoverished people, all in an hierarchizing flux, without the traditionally known identities of nation, race, or gender, but along fault lines which divide, install, and exacerbate human identity in the only true map of our world. Their art uses Internet gateways or some form of processor information if required, to animate their projects to the extent that they are reversals of a spectacle culture. The artist survives, lives and travels through a minimal bandwidth.

NOTES

- 1 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).
- 2 Karl Marx, *Manuscritos de economía y filosofía*, translated by Francisco Rubio Llorente (Madrid: Alianza, 2003).
- 3 Kuo-Yan Wang, "Development of the Art Auction Market in China: From the Perspective of Industry Clusters." *Review of Integrative Business and Economics Research* 9 (2020): 253-258.
- 4 Randolph Starn, "A Historian's Brief Guide to New Museum Studies." *The American Historical Review* 110, n.o 1 (2005): 68-98.
- 5 Paul B. Jaskot, "Digital methods and the historiography of art," *The Routledge Companion to Digital Humanities and Art History* (2020).
- 6 John Ryan y Deborah Sim, "When Art Becomes News: Portrayals of Art and Artists on Network Television News," *Social Forces* 68, n.o 3 (1990): 869-889.
- 7 Drori (2010) first launches a detailed viewpoint on the digital divide subject to development and availability of digital resources.
- 8 Jean-François Lyotard, *La condición posmoderna: Reporte sobre el saber* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1987).
- 9 Stephen Zepke, "A work of art does not contain the least bit of information": Deleuze and Guattari and Contemporary Art." *Performance Philosophy* 3, n.o 3 (2017): 751-765.
- 10 Elizabeth Currid Halkett, *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art, and Music Drive New York City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Ann Markusen, "Urban Development and the Politics of a Creative Class: Evidence from a Study of Artists." *Environment and Planning A* 38, n.o 10 (2006): 1921-1940.
- 11 Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay and Reynaldo Thompson, "The Search for Entropy: Latin America's Contribution to Digital Art Practice," presented in the Digital Humanities Conference, México City in June of 2018. Publish as: Thompson, Reynaldo and Tirtha Mukhopadhyay, "Digital Arts in Latin America: A Report on the Archival History of Intersections in Art and Technology in Latin America," *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (2020): Retrieved June 9, 2021. <https://academic.oup.com/dsh/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/llc/fqaa046/5999149?redirectedFrom=fulltext>
- 12 "José Mujica Quotes," *BrainyQuote*, www.brainyquote.com/authors/jose-mujica-quotes. Retrieved on June 3, 2021.
- 13 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Obras I-2*, translated by Alfredo Brotons Muñoz (Madrid: Abada, 2008), 305.
- 14 Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 12, n.o 1 (1985): 59-87.
- 15 Enrique Dussel, *Filosofía de la liberación* (Bogotá: Nueva América, 1996).
- 16 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Corte Madera: Gingko Press, 2003).
- 17 Drori's foundational article captures the concerns and thoughts for digital technology in the new millennium. See: Gili S. Drori, "Globalization and Technology Divides: Bifurcation of Policy Between the 'Digital Divide' and the 'Innovation Divide'," *Sociological Inquiry* 80, n.o 1 (2010): pp. 62-90.
- 18 Abhijit V. Banerjee y Esther Dufro, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (Nueva York: Public Affairs, 2012).
- 19 Karl F. Goser, "Implementation of Artificial Neural Networks into Hardware: Concepts and Limitations." *Mathematics and Computers in Simulation* 41, n.o 1-2 (1996): 161-171.
- 20 This excerpt is taken from a brief article on their installation that Cruz and Piñero wrote in 2017. Piñero, Bernardo y Daniel Cruz. "Acciones Re-motas/Colectivo, Divergencia & Convergencia: Arte en Latinoamérica" 2017 (unpublish).
- 21 Gilbertto Prado, interview with the author, 2020.
- 22 Kausik Mukhopadhyay, interview with the author, 2021.
- 23 Kausik Mukhopadhyay, interview with the author, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sv3eus4UjJl>. Retrieved June 9, 2021. Kausik Mukhopadhyay, interview with the author, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sv3eus4UjJl>. Retrieved June 9, 2021.

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