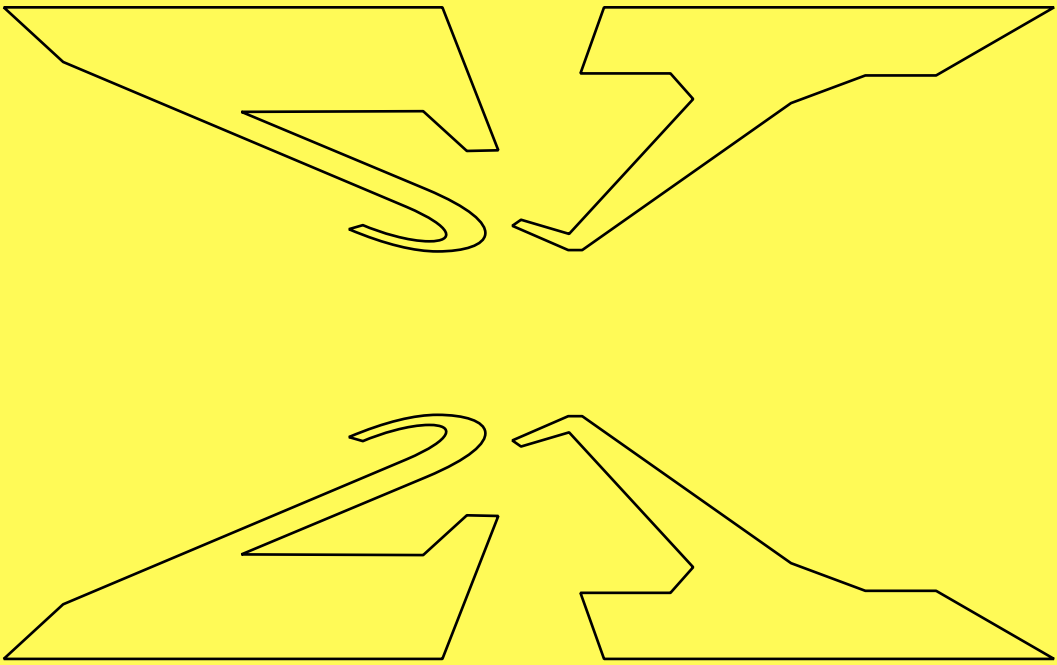

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL

BEITRÄGE ZUR KUNSTGESCHICHTE UND VISUELLEN KULTUR

#1–2024

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Towards a Multi-Temporal Pluriverse of Art. Decolonizing Universalized Historiographic and Temporal Frameworks

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ARTICLES – ARTIKEL

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INTRODUCTION

TOWARDS A MULTI-TEMPORAL PLURIVERSE OF ART. DECOLONIZING UNIVERSALIZED HISTORIOGRAPHIC AND TEMPORAL FRAMEWORKS

Birgit Hopfener & Karin Zitzewitz

A crucial challenge facing art history is the need to decolonize our core assumptions and methods. At its most fundamental level, the discipline must reconceptualize its temporal frameworks by addressing the effects and conflicts that stem from the universalization of Eurocentric concepts of time and history, and by responding to the world's temporal heterogeneity. Co-constituted as a "scientific" discipline in nineteenth-century Europe with the modern Western temporal regime,[1] art history conceptualizes and orders the world according to binaries such as tradition versus modernity, and self and other, in line with colonial and imperial Eurocentric power structures. Despite an enduring awareness of historiographical, temporal, cosmological, epistemological, and ontological complexities, art history, like the wider humanities, has struggled to attend to the world's entangled temporal multiplicity. Institutionalized art history continues to slot art objects into distinct temporal and spatial containers, even in the wake of post-structuralist and postcolonial critiques of historicism; conventional art historical scholarship is divided into fields bound by historical period and place and centered upon archives all too often built under conditions of colonial rule. More recent art historical discourses that critically engage with the issue of art historical time emphasize the temporal instability of artworks and suggest alternative anachronic and heterochronic models of history writing.[2] These approaches are

1
Aleida Assmann's critical engagement with the "modern western regime" is helpful here. Ead., *Is Time Out of Joint? On the Rise and Fall of the Modern Western Regime*, Ithaca, NY 2020.

2
See for example: Keith Moxey, What Time Is It in the History of Art?, in: id. and Dan Karlholm (eds.), *Time in the History of Art. Temporality, Chronology, Anachrony*, Abingdon/New York 2020, 26–42; Eva Kernbauer, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions since 1990*, New York/London 2022; Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York 2010. Thank you to Akshaya Tankha for reminding us of Nagel and Wood's work.

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promising, since the acknowledgment of temporal instability is the first step to thinking beyond the coevalness denied by the modern Western temporal regime.[3] However, they do not yet sufficiently conceptualize the premises of coevalness, which include the social, political, and epistemological structures, inequalities, and hierarchies that constitute our shared present.[4] They are not sufficiently theorized, therefore, to allow a pluriversal critical framework of art to emerge.

Gathering under the decolonial concept of the *pluriverse*,[5] this special issue's authors and artists commit to critiquing universalist claims about the nature of art as exemplary of Western colonial traditions of thought.[6] They wish to go beyond critique, however, by constructing a critical framework that attends to and examines the multiplicity of epistemologies and ontologies that constitute art and the world.[7] A pluriverse is carefully self-conscious about the origins and shifting meanings of concepts and categories in a world conceived as relational and implicated in systems of power, and its construction will require an "epistemological turn" in the humanities as a way to mark and "repair"[8] the violences associated with coloniality. Collaborating across subfields, we activate the humani-

3
Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York 1983, ch. 1, Time and the Emerging Other, 1–35.

4
Mark Rifkin also emphasizes that "the idea of a shared present is not a neutral designation", and that it is therefore necessary to move beyond an inclusionary approach by examining the premises of coevalness. Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time. Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, Durham, NC 2017.

5
The concept of the pluriverse plays a crucial role in the distinction made in decolonial thought between itself as an engaged thought project designed to link political activism in the present to what they characterize as the merely critical approach taken by postcolonial thought. See Walter Mignolo's discussion of his use of the term in Walter Mignolo, Foreword. On Pluriversality and Multipolarity, in: Bernd Reiter (ed.), *Constructing the Pluriverse. The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, Durham, NC 2018, ix–xvi and Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics. The Real and the Possible*, Durham, NC 2020. We note that some of the most quoted phrases associated with decolonial thought, such as Walter Mignolo's concept of "colonial difference", originate in postcolonial thought. From 1995 on, but especially in his *Local Histories/Global Designs*, Mignolo began to borrow and subtly change Partha Chatterjee's discussion of "the rule of colonial difference", in which the point is less the distinction between colonizer and colonized than the way that difference informed the practices of the colonial state. The essays in this collection attempt to juxtapose these approaches without collapsing their differences. See Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton, NJ 2000; Partha Chatterjee, *A Nation and Its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, NJ 1994.

6
This special issue was initiated as a workshop of the same title, convened by the editors and hosted by Carleton University in Ottawa, which was held on three days in March 2022. After the conclusion of the workshop, several authors joined the editors for a discussion of an initial draft of this introduction. Their comments were enormously helpful in expanding the range of resources the editors drew upon as they revised this text, as well as connecting forms of critique across art historical subfields.

7
Bernd Reiter, Introduction, in: id., Constructing the Pluriverse, 1–24; Escobar, Pluriversal Politics, 26.

8
In the sense of Kader Attia's concept of "repair", see: Kim West, *Repair as Redemption or Montage. Speculations on Kader Attia's Ladder of Light*, 2013 (January 4, 2023).

ties' capacity to create critical awareness and relational knowledge about the world's multiplicity of temporal regimes, including their complex mutual entanglements.[9] We work along the grain of contemporary art that aims to "think otherwise", while articulating how and why it is necessary not only to think in plural ways, but also to acknowledge the interconnectedness of such epistemologies of time with forms of being and of making.

The philosopher and historian Achille Mbembe argues that the plurality of times is "not a series but an interlocking of presents, pasts and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones".[10] In his Africa-centered work, Mbembe seeks to displace the dominant historicist idea of history and its respective uni-linear chronological temporal structure by acknowledging the entangled heterogeneity of historical experiences and by suggesting an anachronic mode of history writing. The durability or materiality of works of art have led art historians to attend much more closely to their particular anachronies. In her study of "big statues", or monumental icons in India, visual theorist Kajri Jain emphasizes the *layering* of temporalities, reading icons as "dynamic assemblages" of heterogeneous processes that unfold at various speeds and take their "efficacy" from the joining of moments drawn from these different timescales.[11] By efficacy, Jain refers to the manner in which phenomena are linked to a "sensible infrastructure" – a term that leverages philosopher Jacques Rancière's synchronic but unstable notion of the distribution of the sensible to explore its dynamic combination of materiality and immateriality, as well as its roles in the support of life.[12] Historian of modern and contemporary art Eva Kernbauer also builds on the work of Rancière when she conceives of anachrony as a historiographical concept that destabilizes conventional temporal order by allowing new temporal connections and respective ways of constituting meaning and identities. In contrast to "anachronism", a term used pejoratively to describe something wrongly positioned in a stable temporal order, anachrony highlights the activating potential when things or events do not fit in or abide by the specific time categories and temporal orders assigned to them.[13] Anachronic historiography allows and articulates the "interlocking of past, present and futures", and invites

9
Cf. Rifkin, Beyond Settler Time.

10
Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley, CA 2001, 16.

11
Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Time of Democracy*, Durham, NC 2021.

12
Ibid., 6. Jain builds primarily on Jacques Rancière's *Dissensus and Distribution of the Sensible* in this part of her work.

13
Kernbauer, Art History and Anachronic Interventions, 7–8.

experiences of nonidentical temporality through which our shared yet heterogeneously situated historical now is continuously shaped and reshaped.

We build on these attempts to capture experiences of multiple temporalities in order to examine and pluralize art historical debates about conceptualizations of art's relation to history and time. Working from art historical archives sited in Asia and the Americas, including Indigenous communities in both regions, we explore how artists have engaged materials and realms of thought and practice often dismissed as external to the canonized history of art.[14] We find within those artistic works the seeds of an epistemological shift towards "theoretical autonomy"[15] and the sort of "cognitive justice"[16] that is premised on recognition of and across differences in thought. Cultural studies scholar and director of content of the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands Wayne Modest proposes "thinking with" as a "a certain kind of collaborative criticality", an ambition that "involves reflecting on how we might live with and among others in the world in more just and equitable ways, but also in ways that acknowledge that we do so 'from' drastically different subjectivities and vantage points".[17] Modest would likely agree with historian of Tribal/Indigenous communities in India Prathama Banerjee and her co-authors, who warn of the difficulties inherent to "thinking across traditions" and suggest that we can guard against the tendency to instrumentalize difference – or what they memorably describe as "shopping for concepts from a variety shop" – by asking "*how*" rather than "*what*" questions. As they suggest, "instead of approaching a tradition in

14
Indigeneity is, of course, a highly contested category, with radically different affordances across the communities and societies discussed by authors in this special issue. See Mary Louise Pratt, Afterword. Indigeneity Today, in: Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn (eds.), *Indigenous Experience Today*, Oxford/New York 2007, 397–404; Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle H. Raheja, Indigeneity, in: eaed. (eds.), *Native Studies Keywords*, Tucson, AZ 2015, and Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time. 'Primitives' and History-Writing in a Colonial Society*, Oxford 2006.

15
Prathama Banerjee, Aditya Nigam, and Rakesh Pandey, The Work of Theory. Thinking across Traditions, in: *Economic & Political Weekly* 51/37, 42–50, September 10, 2016 (June 10, 2022). Thank you to Akshaya Tankha for bringing this essay and Banerjee's work to our attention. The essay makes the claim to "move from the position of being a critic of Western theory to that of being a composer and assembler of a new theory from different sources and different histories. In order to become free theoretical subjects".

16
Boaventura de Sousa Santos (ed.), *Cognitive Justice in a Global World. Prudent Knowledges for a Decent Life*, Lanham, MD 2007, explicates a term claimed by STS scholar Shiv Vishwanathan, who provides the afterword.

17
Modest describes the conversation series that he organized in the Research Center for Material Culture in the following terms: "RCMC's *Thinking With* is a conversational series that makes a commitment to a certain kind of collaborative criticality. This project complements several of our existing initiatives, as well as our attentiveness to the notion of "togetherness". *Thinking With* arises out of the NMVW's mission *to contribute to world citizenship*. For us, this ambition involves reflecting on how we might live with and among others in the world in more just and equitable ways, but also in ways that acknowledge that we do so 'from' drastically different subjectivities and vantage points. *Thinking With* then offers a form of joined-up problem solving that imagines a future that we can only fashion together." Id., *Thinking With*, Research Center for Material Culture (January 4, 2023).

terms of its substantive concerns in the first place, we could begin by asking how thinking proceeds in that tradition".[18] This substitution has enormous potential for studies of art history, for we can look to artistic practice as past and present material traces of *how* knowledges are articulated and negotiated over time. In so doing, these papers expand the temporal structures that are understood to underlie activities of meaning making, recording alternative modes for constituting ourselves and relating to the world and to each other.

In short, we intervene in discourses of global contemporaneity and global contemporary art history that all too often name temporal heterogeneity while struggling to find methods capable of assessing its implications.[19] By taking a purposely broad, cross-field approach, this volume allows for consideration of plural temporalities in multiple moments and geographical sites. It plots intersections at the most fundamental level of analysis, tracking the implications and political effects of various philosophies of time and of history writing. While each essay offers novel analyses that are of use to art historical debates bounded by time, place, and canons of artistic value, as a collection, these essays also demand new reading practices. They take temporal diversity and historical entanglements as their starting point, and employ implicitly or explicitly relational comparative methods that together establish a pluriversal critical framework for the understanding of art.

Latin American decolonial theorist Arturo Escobar conceptualizes the pluriverse as a counter-model to the modern Western idea of one universal world. Arguing for a "relational ontology" that he grounds in Indigenous epistemologies of "radical interdependency" between nature and man, he understands "pluriversality as a shared project based on a multiplicity of worlds and ways of worlding life".[20] Walter Mignolo, a close colleague of Escobar working in the same field, explains how a pluriversal concept of the world is connected through a "power differential" that follows the "logic of coloniality [ongoing colonial violence] covered up by the rhetorical narrative of modernity".[21] For him the pluriversal approach is "not about changing the world (ontology) but about changing the beliefs and understandings which could lead to changing our (all) praxis

18
Banerjee, Nigam, and Pandey, The Work of Theory, 47.

19
Terry Smith, Introduction. The Contemporaneity Question, in: Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (eds.), *Antinomies of Art and Culture. Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Durham, NC/London 2008, 1–19; Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All. Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London 2013.

20
Escobar, Pluriversal Politics, 26.

21
Ibid.

of living in the world".[22] Carefully distinct, the pluriversal method builds on postcolonial approaches to emancipation of the world from the modern Western temporal regime by making moves that many theorists have dismissed as politically problematic.[23] When pluriversal theories acknowledge and examine the multiple temporalities that constitute the world, they risk bringing a West/non-West binary back in through the back door, and, ultimately, a collapse into cultural relativism.[24] Temporal pluralism is not the end goal, however, but rather the means to produce situated accounts of works of art that hold open productive differences between and within worlds of art-making. By making room for incommensurable temporalities, it is possible to evaluate their effects while avoiding neat resolutions. Overall, the project is not interested in positing "radical alterity",[25] per se, but rather practicing critical art history as a relational comparative practice.

We distinguish a relational comparative art historical practice from conventional approaches that remain rooted in a teleological temporal structure and ignore Eurocentric hierarchies. Comparison has been central to the art historical discipline from its beginnings in German-speaking academe at the turn of the twentieth century. The comparative method, ingrained in such oppositions as Heinrich Wölfflin's linear versus painterly or Alois Riegl's haptic versus optic, was the basis of *Kunstwissenschaft*, the scientific or systematic inquiry into art's history. Understanding art as developing over time through formal and progressive change, advocates of this evolutionary and positivist approach to the history of art employed comparisons and developed hierarchies. Art's history became systematized according to a Eurocentric geographical and temporal organization, which in turn shaped the constitution of a canon of Western art. In this sense, following the logic of inclusion and exclusion, the method of comparison necessarily involved judgment and selection. With the advent of social art history in the 1970s and the more recent global turn, the comparative method has been criti-

22
Mignolo, Foreword, x.

23
Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ 2000, esp. chs. 2, 3, and the epilogue; Boaventura De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire. The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*, Durham, NC/London 2019. Chakrabarty's work was inspirational for some decolonial theory, even as it critiqued earlier efforts to theorize "multiple modernities" or "alternative modernities", as understood by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, Multiple Modernities, in: *Daedalus* 129/1, 2000, 1–29 and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (ed.), *Alternative Modernities*, Durham, NC/London 2001. The conflict between decolonial and postcolonial approaches is itself an important phenomenon. See Suren Pillay, The Problem of Colonialism. Assimilation, Difference, and Decolonial Theory in Africa, in: *Critical Times* 4/3, December 2021, 389–416.

24
Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, Durham, NC/London 2016, 11–19.

25
See for example: David Graeber, Radical Alterity Is Just Another Way of Saying "Reality". A Reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in: *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5/2, 2015, 1–41 (March 5, 2024).

cized as decontextualizing and de-historicizing. Under the sign of critique, socio-historical, postcolonial, transnational, and transcultural approaches to art history have challenged modern Western hierarchies in the judgment and selection of canonical works.[26]

By contrast, we advocate for grounding comparison in a shared yet disjunctive heterotemporal present. This approach conceives of art as a transcultural site,[27] dynamically constituted through asymmetric (power) relations: that is, contact, exchange, *and* conflict.[28] In order to reconsider comparison from a pluriversal perspective, we must take the world's entangled multiplicity as its starting point. With that in mind, relational comparative art history practice attends to specific regional and historical contexts and how they relate to each other, while continuously scaling back and forth between multiple and entangled perspectives. Our position is informed by the work of comparative literary scholar Shu-mei Shih, who writes,

> The relational method informed by world history, I contend, allows for the scaling back and forth between the world and the text as well as along the intermediary scales, moving toward a more integrated conception of comparative literature and world literature, where the issue is not inclusiveness or qualification (which text deserves to be studied or designated as "world literature" and which does not) but excavating and activating the historically specific set of relationalities across time and space.[29]

A relational approach therefore examines "processes through which forms [and discourses] emerge in local contexts with circuits of exchange".[30] It questions and deconstructs universalized art histori-

26
These are slightly rephrased formulations co-written in the context of the lecture series "On Comparison" organized at Carleton University in 2018/2019 by Birgit Hopfener and Mitchell Frank. Readings that informed the lecture series included among other publications: Jaś Elsner (ed.), *Comparativism in Art History*, New York/London 2017; Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (eds.), *Comparison. Theories, Approaches, Uses*, Baltimore 2013.

27
Monica Juneja, *Can Art History Be Made Global? Meditations from the Periphery*, Berlin 2023, 33.

28
"Contact, interaction, entanglement make the transcultural field constituted relationally, so that asymmetry, as one attribute of relationships (together with categories such as difference, non-equivalence, dissonance) is an element that makes up this field." Monica Juneja, Understanding Transculturalism. Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna in Conversation, in: Model House Research Group (eds.), *Transcultural Modernisms*, Berlin 2013, 22–33.

29
Shih Shu-mei, Comparison as Relation, in: Felski and Stanford Friedman, Comparison, 79–98, here 80.

30
We are here referring to Monica Juneja's conceptualization of the transcultural as a tool of analysis and of epistemic critique. See: Juneja and Kravagna, Understanding Transculturalism, and Monica Juneja, Can Art History Be Made Global?, 21.

cal taxonomies, values, and hierarchies,[31] while conceiving of units of investigation as unstable, or, as "continually defined as participants in and as contingent upon the historical relationships in which they are implicated".[32] Art enacts agency in and through this method of analysis, rather than emerging as an effect of institutional structures.[33]

When combined with a relational art historical method, the pluriversal framework allows the authors and artists to carefully examine the complexity of the multiple *and* entangled temporalities that constitute our shared present and make and re-make world/s. In so doing, these essays undermine what Indigenous art historian Mishuana Goeman calls the "fixity" of colonial narratives that impose and secure spatialities of understanding on Indigenous peoples, particularly in the settler colonies in which the majority of the artists and authors live and work.[34] By conceiving of knowledge/s as relational and "situated",[35] we attend to colonial power structures and other hierarchies, to social, political, and historical contexts, to positionalities, and to implicated subject positions.[36] A pluriversal framework allows us to articulate how concepts of time, art, and the world are articulated through specific choices of form, media, materials, scale, artistic techniques, and aesthetic strategies, which are themselves constituted by multiple and entangled (art) histories and concepts of time and historiography.

The last model for the pluriverse we consider is provided by philosopher Yuk Hui, most notably his conceptualizations of *technodiversity* (2016) and art and cosmotechnics (2020).[37] Hui begins with the world in crisis, and he looks towards pluriversal thinking to counter the modern Western temporal regime and the omnipresence of Western science and technology, which, as he argues, are the root of our present dilemmas. Focusing on Chinese thought traditions, Yuk Hui shows how technology and art shaped by Chinese

31
Monica Juneja, Global Art History and the "Burden of Representation", in: Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Global Studies. Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, Ostfildern 2011, 281.

32
Ibid.

33
Ibid.

34
Mishuana Goeman, *Mark My Words. Native Women Mapping Our Nations*, Minneapolis 2013. Thank you, Carmen Robertson, for bringing Goeman's scholarship to our attention.

35
Donna J. Haraway, Situated Knowledges. The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, in: *Feminist Studies* 14/3, 1988, 575–599.

36
Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Stanford, CA 2022.

37
Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China. An Essay in Cosmotechnics*, Falmouth 2016; Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics*, Minneapolis 2021.

cosmology and Daoist philosophy are *cosmotechnics* that offer an alternative way of relating and making sense of the world. Understanding art as embodiment and as the interpretation of human-world relationships, he argues that analyses of the varieties of experiences of art can help us to rethink technology today. He focuses on how the experiences afforded by Chinese landscape painting (*shanshui hua*) operate through the immanent cosmological principle Dao, which he describes as a structure of "oppositional continuity" and recursivity.[38]

Hui demonstrates that history writing that takes different cosmotechnics as its starting point does not follow the logic of progress and is not written according to stages or periods.[39] As in the decolonial models we have discussed, Hui's model rejects history as a unified project in favor of a historically constituted, entangled pluriverse. Unusually, however, Hui champions what he calls the "individuation of thinking", in which we continuously rethink our frames of meaning making as we perform historical analyses of different thought traditions and cosmologies. He champions "fragmentation as the path towards a possible recomposition".[40] To Hui, fragmentation relates art to its locality, which is conceived not as an essentialist category, such as a nation or a people, but rather as a "knowledge system" that is part of a pluriverse of knowledges that can be made generally available.[41] Such "recosmicizing", to use Hui's word, does not mean trying to recuperate pre-modern, pre-colonial pasts. It is not traditionalist.[42] It means instead to pluralize the archive of meaning making, in order to "search for extant resources for reworlding the world",[43] as Pheng Cheah calls it, in order to "find new ways of coexisting that will allow us to transform modern technology".

The papers in this special issue identify and bring together scholars from areas of particular strength in debates about tempo-

38
Hui, Art and Cosmotechnics, 44.

39
Anders Dunker, On Technodiversity. A Conversation with Yuk Hui, in: *Los Angeles Review of Books (LARB)*, June 9, 2020 (February 6, 2024).

40
Yuk Hui, "On the Varieties of Experience of Art", keynote lecture in the context of our workshop "Towards a Multi-temporal *Pluriverse* of Art. Decolonizing Universalized Historiographic and Temporal Frameworks", March 10, 2022.

41
Ibid. And in this respect, Yuk Hui's perspective and our project differ from Walsh's and Mignolo's approach to decolonization which "see[s] a radical opposition, indeed a chasm, between decolonial thought and European ideas of modernity, progress, and freedom, with Latin American Indigenist movements as their model for where freedom is to be found". See Arjun Appadurai's review of *On Decoloniality* by Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh: Arjun Appadurai, Beyond Domination. The Future and Past of Decolonization, in: *The Nation* 312/6, March 22, 2021, 52–54.

42
Dunker, On Technodiversity.

43
Pheng Cheah, What Is a World?, 13.

rality in art and art history. We begin with two fields that have been the site of important disciplinary critique: the historiography of modernism and the display of Indigenous art in museums. The critique of the historiography of modernism – so stubbornly tied to a linear historical narrative of technological progress and artistic "innovation" – has been crucial to rethinking the discipline.[44] In her essay, On the Impossibility of Global Modernisms, Tatiana Flores rejects models of global art history that might mistake the difficulty of telling a more inclusive story. She finds a revealing moment in the reception of French Impressionism in post-revolutionary early twentieth-century Mexico, decades after it was supposedly superseded by several other stylistic movements. As she argues, Mexican artists reflected upon Impressionist approaches both to practices of painting and Indigeneity that sit uneasily within existing Eurocentric historical frameworks of modernism. The "broken brushstrokes" were politically loaded and Impressionist plein-air painting in Mexico became "a democratizing project that gave people from marginalized communities the tools to represent themselves". Carmen Robertson's Beading Back and Forth. Upending Temporality through Knowledge Transmission, is equally critical of art history's categorical rigidity, highlighting its exclusion of the non-linear, cyclical temporalities and material agencies associated with the glass bead as an active, agentic "being" from the museological approach to North American Indigenous art. Robertson's paper at once critiques the museological paradigm – its "denial of Indigenous temporal sovereignty"[45] – and finds in the work of contemporary Indigenous artists an alternative temporal paradigm that collapses the distinction between living and ancestral knowledge. "Locating beadwork beyond the confines of a linear temporal structure," she argues, "shifts discourse from objectification to an intersectional one of process, activation, and relationality." Such pluralization of time rejects a definition of coevalness defined in non-Indigenous terms and facilitates self-determination.[46]

Both papers ask us to rethink chronological temporal frameworks of art and conceive of artworks as temporally unstable agents of intersectional, entangled, or inter-generational history writing. They require authors to appreciate the "productive temporal discrepancy of an action, an event, a thought, or a subject with its

44
Of particular importance to this group of authors is Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism. Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, Delhi 2000; Ruth B. Phillip and Elizabeth Harney (eds.), *Mapping Modernisms. Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism*, Durham, NC/London 2019; Ming Tiampo, *Gutai. Decentering Modernism*, Chicago 2011. Both Phillips and Tiampo were actively involved in the workshop as respondents.

45
Rifkin, Beyond Settler Time, 2.

46
Ibid., 3.

assigned position in a chronological order"[47] as a productive way of anachronic history writing.

In the course of their critique of the strictly linear historiography of modernist art history, Flores and Robertson identify sites that, in Rancière's words, "are given the capacity to define completely original points of orientation (*les aiguillages*), to carry out leaps from one temporal line to another".[48] They recognize the *habitus* of artists and their viewers, whether understood through embodiment, proprioception, or ideas of the sensible, as having sufficient disruptive power. Not coincidentally, those same confounding analytical sites become the explicit focus of other papers, as the urgent rereadings of modernism by art historians find their echo in the practices of contemporary artists.

Our next two papers examine the manner in which contemporary artists project pluriversal thinking in their works of art, by harnessing materials, knowledge sources, and forms of imagination that layer or interlock models of time. An artist project by Sahej Rahal presents the artist's experiments with artificial intelligence (AI) technology for the production of images, through which he attempts to counter the subjugating effects of both Hindu nationalism and algorithmic capitalism. In an interview Against Extinction, Karin Zitzewitz engages the artist in a productive conversation about the employment of the Sufi and Bhakti concept of *anhad*, or "without limit", and its resonances with Arturo Escobar's decolonial approach of pluriversality, in its countering of naturalized, one-dimensional political ontologies through a radical commitment to multiplicity and an understanding of "life as limitless flow". Similarly, art historian Peggy Wang's Animating the Inanimate. Qiu Anxiong's *New Book of Mountains and Seas* examines Qiu's radical commitment to the exploration of perception and the constitution of knowledge in light of the possibilities held open by pluriversal thinking. Wang examines the artist's trilogy of animations, *New Book of Mountains and Seas*, which refers to a second-century CE encyclopedic bestiary and imagines the contemporary world through the eyes of someone living in that earlier moment. Qiu's animations, like Rahal's, harness the power of estrangement with and through technology, grounding Western colonialism, extractive economies, and environmental exploitation in a discourse of materialism that the artist opposes to an animism that reclaims and reanimates inert forms.

As Wang and Zitzewitz make clear, Qiu and Rahal share a preoccupation with the status of media, experimenting with forms of animation in which the former directly leverages its connections to the history of painting, while the latter does so indirectly, through

47
Kernbauer, Art History and Anachronic Interventions, 7.

48
Jacques Rancière, The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth (English translation), in: *InPrint* 3/1, Article 3, 2015, 21–52, here 47.

publicly available AI tools that have learned how to build images from existing data sets. Both papers consider the productivities of artistic practice as a form of knowledge-making. Their juxtaposition with the previous two interventions in historiographical and museological practice are meant to demonstrate the project's commitment to considering questions of *how* knowledge traditions are continued and/or interrupted by contemporary actors. As Zitzewitz and Wang make clear, both Rahal and Qiu knowingly engage the differential understandings of temporality of their audiences, slipping among conventions associated with gaming and animation as well as more authoritative and freighted forms of artistic tradition.

To this constellation of forms of knowledge, the experience of time, and the capacities of medium, Birgit Hopfener adds questions of exhibitionary experience by focusing on a non-representationalist concept of how art and reality, art and the past relate to one another. In her essay A Group Dance that Never Ends. A Pluriversal Approach to *Continuum – Generation by Generation* (2017) Hopfener explores artist-curator Qiu Zhijie's mobilization of endlessness, or *buxi* 不息, as a traditional concept central to Chinese process cosmology and philosophy that Qiu identifies as a forgotten key "operating mechanism in Chinese art".[49] Qiu's exhibition engages a concept of art that understands, articulates, navigates, and mediates a world conceived as an impermanent and endless transformational process. Hopfener evaluates the engagement with *buxi* – and the respective alternative ontology and temporality of art and world – as a useful mode of decolonizing the discipline of art history. Arguing that a dynamic pluriversal approach can retain the situatedness of the multiple and transculturally entangled perspectives that (re)shape critical discourses around the exhibition, she seeks to understand the criticism leveled by colleagues in and outside of China who see the exhibition's reference to *buxi* as too close to the official nationalist agenda and as dismissive of individual freedom.

A similar engagement with the political status of aesthetic difference is found in Akshaya Tankha's Monuments, Temporality, and the Aesthetics of Indigenous Presence in Postcolonial South Asia. The memorials Tankha describes were erected to honor soldiers lost to the armed movement for political autonomy in and from India on behalf of the Naga people, an Indigenous group that crosses India's northeastern border with Myanmar. Tankha demonstrates how the monuments escape the secular historicist temporality associated with the modern war monument through their association with the Naga stone monolith. Foregrounding the layering of meanings and temporal and physical scales, Tankha notes the retention of the animist qualities of stone and provision of a common space for respite typical of Naga monoliths, even as the memorials' roadside form provides passersby an experience of

[49] Qiu Zhijie's curatorial statement.

visual monumentality and enframing of the landscape. The essential point, for Tankha, is how the monuments' "slippage across domains of practice that are co-constituted as separate and opposed exemplifies the plural and layered temporality of Indigenous presence amidst its marginalization by the state in postcolonial South Asia".

Our last two papers engage the domain of ecology, which remains one of the most important sites for rethinking temporality within the humanities. As in that literature, these authors oppose the temporalities found in the natural world to the historical horizons associated with extractive capitalism and nuclear war. In her "Not the End". Artists on and against Nuclear Closure, Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou considers "the violently slow pace of the bodily manifestation of nuclearity", a term that marks the ontological shifts between the nuclear and non-nuclear in all sites associated with the production of nuclear power and weapons. She tracks the slow and recursive effects of radiation exposure on Indigenous and First Nation communities in North America through the work of artists Eve Andrée Laramée and Bonnie Devine, exploring their "practices of endurance" as a practical politics of opposition to settler temporalities. Emilia Terracciano's essay, Of Scales and Times. Planetary Friction at Play in the Work of Simryn Gill, explores the artist's considerations of the materialities of Malay rubber plantations in light of their central role in the colonial economy. Gill muses on the "possibility of life" amidst the ruins of capitalism through her choice of materials and process: time-consuming record-making activities. Drawing from her immediate surroundings she creates records of found things through the act of "rubbing". She covers the object with ink and superimposes sheets of paper, which she then rubs through an up-and-down or circular repeated movement.

In an analysis that resonates with many of these essays, Terracciano identifies differences in pace, rather than simply temporal direction or form, as crucial to the effects and affects of Gill's works. That point is crucial to Mavrokordopoulou's work, which registers the extraordinary timescale of nuclearity, which operates at such a slow pace that it is nearly impossible to square with human experience. Both authors ground their analyses in specific histories of colonial and capitalist extraction, joining together consideration of human and ecological devastation with an attention to cosmology and histories of representation. Through these papers, this collection intersects with the discourse of ecological humanities, but it subsumes what often posed as a new urgency brought on by climate crisis within a broader, and more enduring concern with coloniality and the limitations it places on both thought and political action.

In addition to their provision of a common critique of progressive historicity, these papers make careful and specific interventions in their own geographically bounded art historical literatures. These pointed commentaries emerge particularly in the authors' treatment of the different status of religion within modern and contemporary art, the opening up of the question of art through explorations of alternative cosmologies, or of the politics of Indigeneity

or the conditions for artistic expression in the societies in which art is produced and/or exhibited.

Recognition of such differences among the social contexts for art is crucial to retaining the specificity of the analysis, and to prevent a collapse into mere generality. In maintaining this discipline, this collection presents itself as a model for relational comparative analysis within an art history that all too often finds methodological innovation only within a common, and typically Western geography, history, and/or canon. It calls for an "exploded global art history"[50] committed to critical and relational historiographical research of the multiple and entangled temporalities that constitute art, and its different concepts of how to relate to history and time in specific social, political, epistemological, and cosmological contexts.

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[50] Aruna D'Souza, Introduction, in: ead. and Jill Casid (eds.), *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn*, Williamstown, MA 2014, vii–xxiii.

ARTICLES
BEITRÄGE

ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF GLOBAL MODERNISMS

Tatiana Flores

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
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ABSTRACT

As art history begins to take seriously the imperative to decolonize, one of the most vexing areas of resistance to change is the conventional periodization of art historical epochs. Even while acknowledging that spatial divisions like West and Non-West are deeply problematic, as are geographic divisions per se, we continue to honor the "history" in the discipline's nomenclature by insisting on temporality as a primary organizing category. The period commonly designated as "modernist" (roughly 1860 to 1960) is particularly difficult to divorce from Western ideals of progress as defined both by technological "advances" and by the heroization of artistic "innovation". When the modernist moment attempts to open itself up to global narratives, its structuring undercurrent is a particular vision of the art of the West. In this essay, I read the conventional narrative of modernism through a decolonial lens and revisit the reception of Impressionism in the 1910s and 1920s in Mexico to consider how an artistic idiom widely seen as retrograde at that moment became the basis for a radical rethinking around the democratization of art. My analysis exposes how, because of its championing of novelty and its inherent Eurocentrism, the category of modernism obscures and suppresses artists and narratives that fall outside of its limited purview.

KEYWORDS

Impressionism; Modernism; Global modernisms; Mexican art; Decolonizing art history; Critical race art history; Modernity/coloniality.

Monet is only an eye, but good god, what an eye![1]
Paul Cézanne, ca. 1905

You once told me that the human eye is god's loneliest creation. How so much of the world passes through the pupil and still it holds nothing. The eye, alone in its socket, doesn't even know there's another one just like it, an inch away, just as hungry, as empty.[2]
Ocean Vuong, 2019

I. The Gaze of Modernism

Among the best-known epigrams around French Impressionism, Paul Cézanne's backhanded compliment encapsulates a crucial assumption of Western art from the Renaissance into the twentieth century: that the artist is an individual of extraordinary talent. While Cézanne recognized Monet's gift as worthy of awe and acclaim, in his own practice he approached painting as a mental process that synthesized perception with intelligence. In his words, "I conceive [of art] as a personal apperception. I situate this apperception in sensation, and I ask the intelligence to organize it into a work."[3]

Apperception is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as "introspective self-consciousness" and, also, "the process of understanding something perceived in terms of previous experience". This approach distinguishes itself from Impressionist painting, which sought to capture the fleeting moment. By invoking the intellect, Cézanne contributed to the attitude, pervasive in modernist art discourse, of Impressionism as lacking conceptual heft – the movement's popularity among collectors and museum publics notwithstanding.[4] In the seminal text *On Cubism* (1912), Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes belittled Impressionism for "promot[ing] a feeble and ineffectual quality of drawing" and for allowing the retina to "predominat[e] over the brain".[5] Marcel Duchamp would follow suit, denigrating Impressionist paintings as "mere visual products".[6]

1
In French, "Monet, ce n'est qu'un œil, mais bon Dieu, quel œil!" Ambroise Vollard, *Paul Cézanne*, Zurich 1919, 118.

2
Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, New York 2019, 12.

3
Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, Introduction. The Letters of Cézanne, in: id. (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art. A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, Berkeley, CA/Los Angeles/London 1968, 11–15, here 13.

4
See Tatiana Flores and Rebecca Uchill, 'Strong Modernism' and Its Global Others. The Barnes Foundation's Production of Modernity, in: Martha Lucy (ed.), *The Barnes Then and Now. Dialogues on Education, Installation, and Social Justice*, Philadelphia 2023, 146–171.

5
Albert Gleizes and Jean Metziger, On Cubism (1912), in: Chipp, Theories of Modern Art, 207–219, here 208.

6
Marcel Duchamp, Painting … at the Service of the Mind (1946), in: Chipp, Theories of Modern Art, 392–396, here 394. See, as well, Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley, CA/Los Angeles 1993, 164.

This manner of stylistic one-upmanship would characterize modernism, which has been understood as a period, originating in France in the late nineteenth century, of technical and conceptual advances diffused from centers to peripheries. Within a generation, Impressionism came to be seen in narrow terms: a painterly approach of broken brushstrokes attempting to capture transitory visual experience that had been surpassed.

Cézanne's quip stands in stark contrast to the passage from Vietnamese-American author Ocean Vuong's 2019 novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Structured as a letter from the narrator to his mother, the narrative comments on alienation in diaspora communities – both from the dominant host culture but also within families, where children born of first-generation immigrants often lack a sense of belonging to their parents' homeland. Here the heroic individualism of the Western artist gives way to the aloneness of the human condition. The eye is no longer an extraordinary organ but an unhappy little sphere that does not recognize its twin mere centimeters away. How wrenching is this image of a single eye, unaware that it is not alone! Vuong's evocation of singularity as impoverished in perception and lacking in consciousness provides an entryway for rethinking the values and limits of Western art in a world marked by colonization and its fraught afterlives.

The designation "global", applied to terms such as "modernisms" or "contemporary art", is often taken as an indication of a more open and inclusive art history,[7] when, actually, it functions as a euphemism that masks the power relations that structure the art world, where the West continues to set the terms of knowledge production along with the standards of value.[8] Both the modern and the contemporary are temporal constructs, and as Walter D. Mignolo persuasively argues, "'time' is a fundamental concept in building the imaginary of the modern/colonial world and an instrument for both controlling knowledge and advancing a vision of society based on progress and development".[9] Control of time goes hand in hand with dominion over space. Accompanying the spatial hierarchies that center the West are what historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot termed "North Atlantic universals", or "words that project the North Atlantic experience on a universal scale that they themselves

7
A forceful argument on this point is made by Amelia Jones, who writes, "Most curators who sign up to produce 'global' exhibitions are forced to participate (or do not realize they are participating) fully in the global commodification of world visual culture – the neoliberal joining of disparate works from around the world as art, contributing to the flourishing of tourism – through an entirely European system and Euro-American standards and values." Amelia Jones, Ethnic Envy and Other Aggressions in the Contemporary 'Global' Art Complex, in: *Nka. Journal of Contemporary African Art* 48, 2021, 96–110, here 97.

8
For a deeper discussion of this point, see Arturo Escobar, Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise. The Latin American Modernity/Decoloniality Research Program, in: *Cultural Studies* 21/2–3, 2007, 182–183.

9
Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity. Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham, NC/London 2011, 161.

helped to create [...] particulars that have gained a degree of universality, chunks of human history that have become historical standards".[10] While Monet's eye is constructed through this faux universalism, Vuong's eye – lonely as opposed to heroic – serves as an apt metaphor for other possible narratives about art becoming transformed through the recognition of community and the introduction of dialogic and relational modes of expression. For these histories, variously described as "alternative" or "other", to take hold, the Western model needs to be diminished or, to use Dipesh Chakravarty's terminology, "provincialized".[11] The debates within European modernism are a case in point, projecting themselves as capacious when they were, in fact, narrow and local.

At face value, provincializing implies thinking differently about space, away from the center-periphery model that dominated discussions of art and aesthetics in the twentieth century. Geographer J. M. Blaut summed up the dominant paradigm as follows: "Europe eternally advances, progresses, modernizes. The rest of the world advances more sluggishly, or stagnates: it is 'traditional society.' Therefore, the world has a permanent geographical center and a permanent periphery: an Inside and an Outside. Inside leads, Outside lags. Inside innovates, Outside imitates."[12] Beyond reconsidering spatial hierarchies, Chakravarty's challenge to provincialize also calls for a rethinking of assumptions about time. He posits that "discomfort about periodization based on a Eurocentric idea of modernity is now global".[13] Building on existing groundwork, he explains that terms like "modernity" or "medieval" "imply value judgments from which most contemporary historians want to distance themselves" and that "modernization" and "modernism" "are also tainted words today".[14] Chakravarty claims, wishfully, that contemporary scholars "cannot any longer think in such terms without encountering political, that is to say moral, criticism".[15] This is hardly the case in the humanities where periodization based on the Western idea of time as a linear continuum is still very much

10
Michel-Rolph Trouillot, North Atlantic Universals. Analytical Fictions, 1492–1945, in: *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101/4, 2002, 839–858, here 847.

11
See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ/London 2000.

12
J. M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World. Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History*, New York 1993, quoted in Susan Stanford Friedman, Periodizing Modernism. Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies, in: *Modernism/Modernity* 13/3, 2006, 425–443, here 429.

13
Dipesh Chakravarty, The Muddle of Modernity, in: *The American Historical Review* 116/3, 2011, 663–675, here 663.

14
Ibid., 663–664.

15
Ibid., 664.

operative, as affirmed in the article "Against Periodization; or, On Institutional Time" by literary scholar Eric Hayot. The author asserts that "concepts of period tend [...] to narrate the history of the aesthetic in European time, emplotting beginnings, middles, and ends in a manner that is not [...] merely neutral".[16] The culture of the West continues to be deemed normative and universal, and the art historical canon is the standard through which to evaluate whether a given cultural product may be deigned to be considered art. Art historian Ruth E. Iskin points that "the term 'canon' is associated with the idea of universality and timelessness, implying that it is detached from any particular interests, art-world institutions, the art market and geopolitics".[17] This seeming neutrality is hardly innocuous, conceiving of "time as an abstract, homogeneous measure of universal movement along a singular axis", and delineating who are the agents and who are the receivers.[18]

While often admitting to the problems inherent to this model of diffusion, art history has been loath to grapple with just how much such attitudes have been crucial in cementing a world view premised on white supremacism. Literary scholar Warren Montag writes that "the very form of human universality itself" is "the concept of whiteness".[19] This line of thought meshes well with philosopher George Yancy's argument that "the meaning of whiteness, as universal, contains within itself an obfuscated parasitism that reduces the Black body to a wretched particularity. It is this sense of damned particularity that implies hierarchical *difference*, a form of difference that is defined through the normative structure of whiteness that defines itself as ontologically self-sufficient."[20] Functioning as a closed system operated by the logic of self-referentiality, the Western canon aligns with Yancy's phrase of "ontologically self-sufficient". Iskin notes the distinction between universal and particular as constitutive of the canon: "as long as the Western canon is considered universal, alternatives to it are always particular – whether local, regional, national, ethnic, gender-based and so on. And while counter-canons serve significant purposes, they are always already

16
Eric Hayot, Against Periodization; or, On Institutional Time, in: *New Literary History* 42/4, 2011, 739–756, here 745.

17
Ruth E. Iskin, Introduction. Re-envisioning the Canon. Are Pluriversal Canons Possible?, in: ead., *Re-Envisioning the Canon. Perspectives in a Global World*, London/New York, 2017, 1–42, here 23.

18
Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time. Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, Durham, NC/London 2017, 2.

19
Quoted in John T. Warren, Performing Whiteness Differently. Rethinking the Abolitionist Project, in: *Educational Theory* 51/4, 2001, 451–466, here 458.

20
George Yancy, White Embodied Gazing, the Black Body as Disgust, and the Aesthetics of Un-suturing, in: Sherri Irvin (ed.), *Body Aesthetics*, Oxford/New York 2016, 243–260, here 245.

positioned as 'other' relative to the main (Western male) canon."[21] Indeed, the "lie" that whiteness is "un-raced and universal", which took root in the Americas before absorbing the global, makes all others into minoritized subjects.[22]

A solution Iskin proposes is adopting "pluriversal" canons, borrowing a term from the scholarship on decoloniality and the writings of Arturo Escobar, Mignolo, and others, to describe "a plurality of narratives and canons that are interrelated in multiple and complex ways, not linearly and not uni-directionally".[23] Mark Rifkin similarly calls for thinking of time "as plural, less as a temporality than temporalities".[24] Within this pluralizing framework, however, it is important to acknowledge that "modernity" is not one temporality among others. As Mignolo argues, "modernity is neither an entity nor an ontological historical period, but a set of self-serving narratives" that validate Eurocentrism: it "has been conceived in one line of time, universal time and universal history".[25] One of Mignolo's signature arguments is that modernity and coloniality are co-constitutive: "modernity has always been figured as if it were universal and therefore shall be extended globally: it was assumed that the rest of the planet was going through a similar unfolding of history in the inexorable march toward modernity, and that at some point it would go through the same periodization as Europe. Western Europe and more recently the U.S. were the point of arrival for the rest of the planet."[26]

The viability of pluriversal canons is challenged by the institutional histories of museums and markets, which depend on the unitary framework of modernity. The discipline of art history would need to abandon its faith in the universal as defined by the Western canon and Eurocentric periodization according to a single, linear temporality, while also grappling with the structural racism of

21
Iskin, Introduction, 24.

22
Yancy, White Embodied Gazing, 245.

23
Iskin, Introduction, 24. See, as well, Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics. The Real and the Possible*, transl. by David Frye, Durham, NC/London, 2020. Iskin specifies that "[p]luriversal canons are not synonymous with a mere plurality of currently existing canons ([...] based on periods [...] or on nations [...] or on media)" and neither are they "synonymous with specific counter-canons" such as of African-American, Latinx, or women artists because these ultimately serve as "a supplement to the major authoritative canon" (Introduction, 25). For a critique of pluriversal canons, see Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, Why Horizontal Art History Cannot Escape Computation, in: Agata Jakubowska and Magdalena Radomska (eds.), *Horizontal Art History and Beyond. Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, New York/London 2023, 195–205.

24
Rifkin, Beyond Settler Time, 2.

25
Walter D. Mignolo, What Does It Mean to Decolonize?, in: id. and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality. Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, Durham, NC/London 2018, 105–134, here 110, 117.

26
Ibid., 118–119.

museums and their dependence on a system of patronage tied to the art market. The pervasive structures of capitalism have proven to stand in the way of achieving structural change on the art institutional level. Indeed, decolonizing gestures in US museums have had markedly public and costly effects – such as the controversies that ensued over the Art Institute of Chicago's decision to disband the volunteer docents' program (later reversed) or the Baltimore Museum of Art's plan for deaccessioning contemporary works by white male artists from its collection to expand its collection of women and artists of color.[27]

The authority of the museum for art history, between its public face, prestigious collections, and system of patronage, finds no parallel in other humanistic disciplines. Like whiteness itself, the museum has long been considered neutral and unmarked.[28] Simon Knell's scathing critique of the canon puts into question whether the concept could ever be instrumentalized towards different ends: "The canon is as much a result of institutionalized practice as it is of thought and, aided by the ambitions and limitations of the museum, it is by its very nature monumental, reductive, and essentialist."[29] Pluriversal canons and other decolonial approaches, then, are not merely a matter of expanding histories, recognizing entanglements, and embracing complexity. They require what amounts to a disciplinary reset, beginning with a necessary introspection to admit a discomforting sense of complicity, to check one's privilege and accept accountability, to question the temporal and conceptual frames through which we build knowledge and assign value, and to foster a steadfast commitment to anti-racism.

As Yancy describes it, the very act of looking – the essential aspect of our encounter with an art object – is inherently compromised. Neither innocent nor a given, the gaze is biased and conditioned to uphold white supremacy:

> White *gazing* is a violent process. It is not an atomic act or an inaugural event that captures, in an unmediated fashion, the bareness, as it were, of 'objects.' Indeed, white gazing is an historical achievement [...] the result of white historical

27
On the Art Institute of Chicago controversy, see Rebecca Zorach, Why the Art Institute of Chicago's New Docent Program Faces Whitelash, in: *Hyperallergic*, November 9, 2021. On the Baltimore Museum of Art controversy, see Alex Greenberger, Baltimore Museum Deaccessioning Controversy, Explained. Why a Plan to Sell $65 M. in Art Ignited Debate, in: *Art News*, October 28, 2020 (both last accessed October 11, 2022).

28
Against the myth of museum neutrality, LaTanya Autry and Mike Murawski started the initiative "Museums Are Not Neutral" in 2017. See their website http://artmuseumteaching.com/2017/08/31/museums-are-not-neutral/ (March 10, 2024). See, as well, Sumaya Kassim, Museums Are Temples of Whiteness, in Tatiana Flores, Florencia San Martín, and Charlene Villaseñor Black (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Decolonizing Art History*, New York/London 2024, 128–138.

29
Simon Knell, Modernisms. Curating Art's Past in a Global Present, in: id. (ed.), *The Contemporary Museum. Shaping Museums for the Global Now*, New York/London 2018, 13–36, here 15.

> forces, values, assumptions, circuits of desire, institutional structures, irrational fears, paranoia, and an assemblage of 'knowledge' that fundamentally configures what appears and the how of that which appears [...]. In terms of white gazing, when white bodies look out upon the world, they not only see what has been put there for them to see, and see it in a specific way, but they cooperate consciously or unconsciously, with broader processes of normative and epistemic accretion, in assisting to bring certain objects into view in particular configured ways.[30]

This explanation harkens back to Monet's eye via Cézanne and Duchamp, reminding us that, whatever their quibbles, these artists belonged to a circumscribed circle of men who shaped the canon and set the terms for the "particular[ly] configured" artistic period we come to know as modernism. Their objects elicited a privileged, self-referential, temporally and spatially bounded gaze, not from Vuong's lonely and lowly eye, but from the eyes of communities that were born in whiteness, as it were.[31] Made by white masters, modern art was directed at a white gaze assumed to be attached to a white body. Over time, as modernist artworks became canonized, reproduced, disseminated, and worshiped at the altar of the museum, the gazers – but not the artists – could be of any ethnicity, as they were now conditioned into this mode of looking by "having internalized the logic of the white gaze".[32]

Sociologist Joe Feagin refers to this social conditioning as the "white racial frame". He posits that this "dominant racial frame activates and relates to class-oriented and patriarchal ways of looking at society", to the degree that these views "become embedded in the structure of human brains", making them difficult to challenge or undo.[33] bell hooks earlier invoked the metaphor of the frame to describe "the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality".[34] This dominant frame is not just operative in art history and its institutions, which continue to function under the

30
Yancy, White Embodied Gazing, 243–244.

31
My phrasing here refers to the title of an important recent history of Africa: see Howard French, *Born in Blackness. Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War*, New York 2021.

32
Yancy, White Embodied Gazing, 260, fn. 12.

33
Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame. Centuries of Framing and Counter-Framing*, New York/London 2013, 14–15.

34
bell hooks and Sut Jhally, dir., *bell hooks. Cultural Criticism and Transformation*, transcript of the film, Northampton, MA 1997, 7. hooks referred to contemporary society as a "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy", adding "when we use the term white supremacy, it doesn't just evoke white people: it evokes a political world that we can all frame ourselves in relationship to" (ibid.).

authority of the Western canon and Eurocentric periodization, it is dogma. In all its institutions, art history is structured according to temporal categories that center the modern, even when they refer to regions that are not Europe or when the modern goes unnamed, such as during the Middle Ages (midway between ancient and modern, that is). Modernity is, indeed, the West's crowning achievement. As characterized by decolonial philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "In modernity, geopolitical space, intersubjective relations, economic activity, and the production of knowledge form a nexus of power oriented by imperatives of domination and control that mirror the logic of a division between masters and slaves."[35]

To break the cycle of white (supremacist) gazing, Yancy proposes a process of un-suturing. As he describes it, "The terms 'sutured' and 'un-sutured,' [...] are not only practices that respectively occlude change and engender change, but they are also indicative of what it means to be a human subject at all, that is, indicative of what it means to be *homo possibilitas* (un-sutured) and to be thrown in within the context of historical facticity (sutured)."[36] This anti-racist approach offers the hope of overcoming, or at least countering, whiteness, something the author well knows cannot merely be willed into being. As communications scholar John T. Warren – one of the sources cited in Yancy's article – argues, "Whiteness is not [...] so simply a matter of intent that I can just stop doing it."[37] For Warren as a white man, resisting whiteness "is a place of paradox, a place of struggle, and a place of active discomfort".[38] Yancy, who is African-American, generously allows for the possibility of a white abolitionist project:

> In short, while it is true that whiteness is a site of power, an assemblage of "knowledge," and an effective history, it does not follow that white people are *determined* or devoid of agency qua white, that there is no space for counter-iterative, white anti-racist practices. In other words, there is a space for the practice of un-suturing, where this is both a form of anti-racist practice and a way of being all too human, always already a site of the given (facticity) and the taken (possibility).[39]

35
Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War. Views from the Underside of Modernity*, Durham, NC/London 2008, 3.

36
Yancy, White Embodied Gazing, 254–255.

37
Warren, Performing Whiteness Differently, 454.

38
Ibid., 465.

39
Yancy, White Embodied Gazing, 255.

He emphasizes that un-suturing takes continual effort and "constant *striving*; it will require practice, a reiterative opening and wounding, habits of uncovering the stench of white mendacity".[40] The term "striving" recalls the title of a seminal essay in African-American cultural history, W. E. B. Du Bois's "Strivings of the Negro People", where the author famously introduces his concept of "double consciousness" to describe the emotional and intellectual labor that Black people in the US have to endure to navigate a white world.[41] Yancy turns the tables by asking for white people to do the work. To even begin, however, there must be an acknowledgement of the problem: the hegemony of white supremacist thinking and gazing, along with its all-encompassing, pervasive, impermeable nature. All academic disciplines and educational institutions are implicated. This situation must not persist unchecked, but efforts to counter it are continually frustrated because of the sheer magnitude of the issue: white supremacist frames are so deeply embedded in people's concept of "reality" that the challenge to un-suture presents an existential quandary that most are unwilling to even concede, let alone engage with. Un-suturing is an ethically conscious act that aligns with what Maldonado-Torres refers to as the "decolonial turn", which "is about making visible the invisible and about analyzing the mechanisms that produce such invisibility".[42] The vision metaphor most relevant in this case is not Monet's solitary eye but Vuong's eyes recognizing themselves as a pair and looking for others to connect with. Decolonial thinking offers a way forward. As Maldonado-Torres writes, "For decolonization, concepts need to be conceived as invitations to dialogue and not as impositions. They are expressions of the availability of the subject to engage in dialogue and the desire for exchange."[43] Beyond a future-oriented, pluriversal praxis, the challenge for art history becomes how to reimagine the past.

II. Un-suturing in Mexican Art

I propose that the artists I discuss below were attempting, if only for a brief while, a practice of un-suturing through a critical dialogue with Impressionism, which in their hands became a vehicle towards an art grounded on relationality and driven by concerns

40
Ibid., 257.

41
See W. E. B. Du Bois, Strivings of the Negro People, in: *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1897, 194–198 (January 21, 2024).

42
Nelson Maldonado-Torres, On the Coloniality of Being. Contributions to the Development of a Concept, in: *Cultural Studies* 21/2–3, 2007, 240–270, here 262. See as well, Maldonado-Torres, Against War, 8.

43
Maldonado-Torres, On the Coloniality of Being, 261.

for social and racial justice.[44] Our little-known protagonists are a group of painters affiliated with the open-air painting school on the outskirts of Mexico City. Founded and directed by Alfredo Ramos Martínez, a committed Mexican Impressionist, they operated during and in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920).[45] It should come as no surprise that their body of work and legacy were broadly dismissed as "belated" because of their association with a formal language that had fallen out of fashion.[46] Regarded as seen as minor through a Eurocentric paradigm, they were also minimized by their contemporaries during an era of intense rivalries and ideological rifts.[47] The narrative of modernism that later prevailed in Mexico was heroic and masculinist, corresponding to Paul K. Saint-Amour's characterization of modernism as "the production of aesthetic strength through iconoclasm and strenuous innovation. It is strong people exhibiting strength."[48] In a context where the most famous painters are known as "los tres grandes", or the big three, this description is keenly resonant. One of them, Diego Rivera, sought to become the Mexican Picasso and succeeded. Another, David Alfaro Siqueiros, projected himself as the quintessential macho man, above and beyond the Mexican stereotype. And the third, José Clemente Orozco, could not have appeared more misogynistic if he tried.[49]

To set the stage, it is useful to consider the conquest of Mexico in light of the modernity/coloniality dialectic that Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and other decolonial scholars have probed. Rather than beginning in the twentieth century and thinking about Mexican art through modernization, development, progress, and other familiar temporal tropes, let us rewind the clock by five

44
The following discussion engages with and expands on my monograph on Mexican avant-garde movements of the 1920s. See Tatiana Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes. From Estridentismo to ¡30-30!*, New Haven, CT/London 2013.

45
On the history of the open-air painting schools, see Laura González Matute, *Escuelas de pintura al aire libre y centros populares de pintura*, Mexico City 1987 and *Escuelas de pintura al aire libre, episodios dramáticos del arte en México* (exh. cat. Mexico City, MUNAL/INBA), ed. by Evelyn Useda Miranda, Víctor Mantilla González, Mariana Casanova Zamudio, and María Helena Rangel Guerrero, Mexico City 2014.

46
See, for example, Juan Hernández Araujo [pseudonym of David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jean Charlot], El movimiento actual de la pintura en México. La influencia benéfica de la Revolución sobre las Artes Plásticas, in: *El Demócrata. Diario Independiente de la mañana*, August 2, 1923 (International Center for Arts of the Americas (ICAA) digital database, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Record ID 757972; February 27, 2024).

47
I elaborate on these dynamics in Tatiana Flores, Whose Side Are We On? Artistic Rivalries in Mexican Avant-Garde Art, in: *Journal of History of Modern Art* 32, 2012, 137–172.

48
Paul K. Saint-Amour, Weak Theory, Weak Modernism, in: *Modernism/Modernity* 25/3, 2018, 437–459, here 437.

49
See Mary K. Coffey, Without Any of the Seductions of Art. On Orozco's Misogyny and Public Art in the Americas, in: *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 83, 2003, 99–119.

hundred years. In 1519, Hernán Cortés invaded the land that is today known as Mexico with the purpose of conquering the territory for the Spanish Crown. He landed on the Gulf Coast and founded the city of Veracruz (meaning True Cross) and later made his way inland. Along the way, he relied on translators – Jerónimo Aguilar, a Spaniard who had been shipwrecked in Yucatán for twenty years and had learned to speak Maya, and Malintzin, popularly known as Malinche, who spoke Maya and Nahuatl.[50] Aguilar and Malintzin were crucial interlocutors, and translation was considered essential to the conquest to the degree that Malinche is regarded as the ultimate sellout – a traitor like no other, the Mexican Eve.[51]

Spanish occupation lasted almost three centuries, until a criollo (meaning a Mexican-born, Spanish-descendant) priest, Miguel Hidalgo, made a call to arms on September 16, 1810, and assembled an army of thousands to wage an attack on local elites. When Hidalgo was captured and killed, his mantle was taken up by José María Morelos, an Afro-Mexican priest turned insurgent. In 1821, Mexico became an independent country, and the nineteenth century was devoted to nation-building and infrastructure but also fending off, not always successfully, neocolonialist aggression from the United States and Western Europe. In 1848, Mexico lost almost half of its territory in the Mexican-American War. It is important to emphasize, however, that Mexico was and is also a settler country, and the post-independence "Mexicans", the representatives of the nation, were white elites and privileged mestizos (people of mixed ancestry). The coloniality of social relations, between this demographic, and the disenfranchised Natives, Afro-Mexicans, and deeper-skinned mestizos remained essentially untouched, if not to say worsened post-independence. As Mignolo has noted, "geopolitical decolonization sent the colonizer home, but it also adapted and adopted their structure of governance: the nation-state".[52]

In late nineteenth-century Mexico, the government became increasingly authoritarian, economic inequality deepened, and foreign interests took precedence over local needs leading to the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910.[53] An unprecedented constitution promising universal education and land redistribution was ratified in 1917, and the postrevolutionary period, of 1921 to about

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See Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices. An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*, Albuquerque, 2006.

51
For a classic negative portrayal of Malinche, see Octavio Paz, The Sons of La Malinche, in: id., *The Labyrinth of Solitude. Life and Thought in Mexico*, transl. by Lysander Kemp, New York/London 1961, 65–88. For a revindication, see Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *[Un]framing the 'Bad Woman'. Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui and Other Rebels with a Cause*, Austin, TX 2014.

52
Interview. Walter D. Mignolo, in: *E-International Relations*, June 1, 2017 (February 28, 2024).

53
On the Mexican Revolution, see John Mason Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico. The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution*, Berkeley, CA 1987.

1940, was marked by optimism in the possibility of social justice and faith in the potential of art to effect change. The intellectuals who spearheaded the cultural revolution – what came to be known, tellingly, as the Mexican Renaissance[54] – were elites or socially mobile individuals (men, mostly, white or white adjacent), who more than likely held varying degrees of racial and gender-based prejudice, and were at best conscious of their privilege and at worst assumed that their dominance in society was part of a natural order. As such, the matter of representation – of who is speaking and for whom, how, and why – is crucial to consider in any assessment of Mexican modernism. Indeed, Mexican art is emphatically representational, as in figurative. Because it embraces intelligibility, it has been othered in relation to mainstream modernism, which favors the abstract(ed) and the arcane.

Odd as it may be, the revolutionary period and its aftermath were when Impressionism took root in Mexico. This would seem to be in line with the standard story of global modernisms as belated. But we have already established that modernity is not a temporal category and cannot be divorced from coloniality. As Carol Symes writes, quoting José Rabasa, "'invoking the modern is never a natural inconsequential affair, but a violent regulatory speech act.' It suggests that people who inhabit un-Modern times and cultures are not fully developed, not really human, the antithesis of what it means to be modern."[55] Elite Mexicans were deeply sensitive to being seen as not modern, but they did not necessarily embrace modernism's narrative of frenetic innovation and unprecedented originality. And Mexico itself was not invisible to the heroes of the mainstream modernist narrative, beginning with none other than the father-figure (as some would say) Édouard Manet.[56] (Where would art history be without genealogy?) Manet painted a major canvas depicting the execution in 1867 of Archduke Maximilian of Austria, a short-lived emperor of Mexico during the reign of Napoleon III. After Napoleon's fall, Maximilian and two generals were captured and killed by a local army, but the painting imagines the scene as a role reversal in that the soldiers wear French-style uniforms, while Maximilian dons a sombrero. His companions in death are depicted as having significantly darker skin. Indeed, the

54
It is worth noting the words of Mignolo: "The European Renaissance founded itself as re-naissance by colonizing time, by inventing the Middle Ages and Antiquity", in: Mignolo, The Darker Side of Western Modernity, 187. The idea of a Mexican renaissance in the arts was in circulation in the 1910s, but the people who most promoted it were anthropologist Anita Brenner and French painter Jean Charlot during the 1920s and beyond. See Tatiana Flores, An Art Critic in a Contested Field. Anita Brenner and the Construction of the Mexican Renaissance, in: Karen Cordero Reiman (ed.), *Another Promised Land. Anita Brenner's Mexico*, Los Angeles 2017, 86–103, and Jean Charlot, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 1921–1925*, New Haven, CT 1965.

55
Carol Symes, When We Talk About Modernity, in: *The American Historical Review* 116/3, 2011, 715–726, here 716.

56
On Manet as the father of modernism, see Georges Bataille, *Manet*, transl. by Austryn Wainhouse and James Emmons, Lausanne 1955.

man to the emperor's right looks Black. Even though critical literature typically is reluctant to ascribe meaning and intentionality to Manet, the painting reads a lot like social critique. The artist disapproved of French intervention in Mexico. And while this is not specifically an Impressionist painting, he is considered the most significant precursor of the artistic movement that came to be known as Impressionism.

In Mexico, one of the earliest exponents of Impressionism was Joaquín Clausell, a self-taught artist who was also a successful practicing lawyer. Active in the aughts, he worked in isolation.[57] Until the early twentieth century, formal art training in Mexico City was concentrated at the Academy of San Carlos and largely consisted of copying plaster casts and emulating the Old Masters – vernacular visual culture was not considered art.[58] With the upheavals wrought by the outbreak of the revolution in 1910, the students staged a strike to demand curricular changes and the director's resignation. Congregating in a city plaza, they began painting there rather than attending their classes. The practice of plein-air painting became part of the curriculum when a new director, the Mexican Impressionist painter Alfredo Ramos Martínez, established a school of open-air painting in the nearby town of Santa Anita in 1913. Affectionately nicknamed Barbizon, it was a short-lived experiment because with changing revolutionary governments came changes to the governance of the Academy of San Carlos. The school, which changed names three times over the course of the revolution and again in 1929, became a site of contention for the direction art should follow under a new social order which was very much in flux.[59] Ramos Martínez's successor, Dr. Atl, sought to ally it politically with the armed struggle. He too was forced out and fled to Veracruz, joined by a group of artists – including Orozco and Siqueiros – who supported him in publishing the short-lived political newspaper *La Vanguardia*. During these fraught moments of the revolution, painting seemed far from the minds of certain artists. The academy itself closed for three years. Siqueiros enrolled in the army and was eventually sent as an envoy to Spain.

While it is easy to imagine plein-air painting as out of touch with social reality, certain students who had worked at Santa Anita had thrived there and lamented the school's closure. Lola Cueto had enrolled as a teenager and insisted on going back outdoors to paint

57
On Clausell, see Mark A. Castro, 'Echoes of Impressionism'. Joaquín Clausell and the Politics of Mexican Art, in: Emily C. Burns and Alice Rudy Price, *Mapping Impressionist Painting in Transnational Contexts*, London/New York 2021, 192–203.

58
See Jean Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, Austin, TX 1962.

59
For a brief history of the school detailing its various name changes, see entry "Antigua Academia de San Carlos" on the website of the Biblioteca Academia de San Carlos (February 27, 2024).

on her own, much to the dismay of her parents.[60] Her painting of a cabbage patch dates from this era, its bucolic setting contrasting the political turmoil of the time [Fig. 1]. Fernando Leal refused to enroll in the academy but was an eager student of Ramos Martínez in the open-air school. As he reminisced later,

> [T]he open-air light transfigured [the students]. I asked to be allowed to paint. To my intense surprise, I was given an enormous canvas [...] and a set of colors [...] I started painting as if it were a game and soon heard behind me the exclamations that Ramos Martinez never denied anyone: 'It is a Cézanne! One should paint like that without *parti-pris*. What color! Silvery! And *la pate* [sic]! To what texture it builds!' I could understand only a few of these breathless sayings, but I will always remain grateful to Alfredo Ramos Martínez for having confronted me with the most fantastic problems that a painter can face, without attempting to humble me with the pedantry of an academic teacher.[61]

As the revolution unfolded, Leal continued working independently, inspired by the potential of plein-air painting. *El viejo de la olla* (The old man and the pot, 1918) [Fig. 2], a meditative painting of an Indigenous man holding a painted ceramic vessel posed against a field of yellow grass and periwinkle flowers, dates from this era. Its golden hues were likely an homage to the recently deceased Mexican painter Saturnino Herrán (1887–1918), but the dabs of color to describe the landscape referred stylistically to French Impressionism.

Subsequently, Orozco and Siqueiros both denigrated the open-air painting schools, contributing to the dismissal of the artists who promoted them. Orozco mocked it for being detached from its context, writing in his autobiography: "The first thing [Ramos Martínez] did [as director] was to found in Santa Anita [...] an open-air painting school pompously called 'Barbizon,' which was like founding on the Seine River, close to Paris, a Santa Anita with canoes, pulque, charros, enchiladas, huaraches, and knife-fights. Two steps from the Eiffel Tower."[62] While in Spain as a representative of the Mexican government, Siqueiros connected with the local intelligentsia and Latin American expats and set out to influence the direction of modern art of the Americas through the publication of the short-lived journal *Vida Americana*, launched in Barcelona

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On Lola Cueto, see *Lola Cueto. Trascendencia mágica, 1897–1978* (exh. cat. Mexico City, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes) ed. by Estela Duarte, Mexico City 2013. The anecdote about Cueto's parents' anxiety about their daughter being out painting on her own was told to me by Mireya Cueto in 2002.

61
Quoted in Charlot, The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 161.

62
José Clemente Orozco, *Autobiografía*, Mexico City 1945, 39. Author's translation.

[Fig. 1]
Lola Cueto, Campos de col (Cabbage patch), 1916, oil on canvas, Mexico City, Museo Nacional de Arte/INBA © José Pablo Wayne Ridgell Cueto.

[Fig. 2]
Fernando Leal, El viejo de la olla (The old man and the pot), 1918, oil on canvas, 75 × 65 cm, photograph by Francisco Kochen © Fernando Leal-Audirac Collection & Archives.

in 1921.[63] There, he published a manifesto aligning himself with the return-to-order tendencies of post-World War I European art and decrying Impressionism and the open-air painting schools: "Let us discard puerile theories which we have recently welcomed with frenzy in the Americas, sickly branches of the tree of *Impressionism*, pruned by Paul Cézanne, the restorer of the essential."[64]

Reappointed as director of the art academy in 1920, Ramos Martínez established an open-air painting school eventually headquartered in Coyoacán. There, students could live and work independent of the academic curriculum, receiving materials, room, and board at no expense to them. They painted the grounds and the Indigenous models, who worked on the property, forging a strong sense of community. The works produced at the Coyoacán school are not the bucolic Impressionist landscapes of the school's earlier iteration. Instead, they use the pictorial language of broken brushstrokes to confront difference. In some cases, they express solidarity with Indigenous Mexicans, interrogate the unevenness of visual representation, and meditate on the relation of Natives to the land. In short, they propose new directions for modernist figuration. Leal's *El indio del sarape rojo* (The Native man of the red serape, 1920) [Fig. 3] is a larger than life-sized portrait of a groundskeeper, where dabs of paint cover a vertical expanse about two meters high. It is an approach figuration that is unprecedented in French plein-air Impressionism. In fact, Michael Fried argues that after Manet's great figure paintings of the early 1860s, "the century-long immensely productive tradition or problematic of ambitious figure painting [...] came to a close".[65] According to Fried, Impressionist landscape became the future for ambitious painting after Claude Monet's experiments with large-scale figurative painting could not be resolved in paintings such as *Women in the Garden* (1866) or *Luncheon on the Grass* (1865–1866) because, in Fried's words, "the sheer scale of his figures put a kind of pressure on his paint-handling".[66] These remarks are important in terms of what would unfold in Mexican painting: Leal came to abandon the Impressionist brushstroke and looked to Manet for examples of monumental figuration. In 1922, he became one of the founders of the mural movement.

Much smaller in scale, Salvador Martínez Báez's *Joven campesina* (Young peasant woman, 1921) [Fig. 4] recalls the abrupt croppings of Edgar Degas, here using a seemingly truncated composi-

63
See Natalia de la Rosa, Vida Americana, 1919–1921. Redes conceptuales en torno a un proyecto trans-continental de vanguardia, in: *Artl@s Bulletin* 3/2, 2014, 22–35.

64
David Alfaro Siqueiros, Three Appeals of the Modern Guidance of American Painters and Sculptors, in: Mari Carmen Ramírez, Héctor Olea, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *Resisting Categories. Latin American and/or Latino?*, Houston 2012, 348–351, here 351.

65
Michael Fried, The Moment of Impressionism, in: *nonsite.org* 33, 2020 (October 13, 2022).

66
Ibid.

[Fig. 3]
Fernando Leal, El indio del sarape rojo (The Native man of the red serape), 1920, oil on canvas, 188 × 108.5 cm, photograph by Francisco Kochen © Fernando Leal-Audirac Collection & Archives.

[Fig. 4]
Salvador Martínez Báez, Joven campesina (Young peasant woman), 1921, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Arte / INBA, Mexico City.

tion in the service of social commentary. The sitter is positioned in urban space, walking alongside a colonial building that serves as a permanent reminder of the displacement and subjugation of her ancestors and of her own community in the present. Rosario Cabrera's surprisingly bold *Portrait of a Boy* (1921) [Fig. 5] suggests a conjunction between subject and place. Parts of the boy's hair and face are composed of the same tones of blue and green as make up the wooded background. As a settler artist, Cabrera acknowledges the boy's proximity to his land of origins in a manner that brings to the fore the coloniality of the genre of landscape painting. In *El indio de la tuna* (The Native man and the tuna, 1922), Fernando Leal infuses the connection of Indigenous subject to land with religious overtones by suggesting a halo around the sitter's head through his manner of lighting the field in the background. Francisco Díaz de León's *Market Day* (1922) [Fig. 6] imbues his sitters, three women seated on the ground, with a monumental dignity. In many of these paintings, the Indigenous subjects look away, not meeting the viewer's gaze, a gesture that could be interpreted as subjugated humility or refusal.[67] The practice of figure painting at the school entailed surrounding the model with the easels, underscoring the one-sidedness of visual representation [Fig. 7]. The works mentioned above, however, betray a self-consciousness on the part of elite (mestizo or white) artists of their own privilege and positionality. I regard them as an attempt at un-suturing, as described by Yancy. In their visual experimentation through a stylistic affinity with Impressionism and Postimpressionism, they treat the Indigenous subject with an unprecedented level of attention and respect. Rendering their faces with a high degree of verisimilitude – as portraits rather than as types – the artists establish an ethical relationship of the face-to-face encounter as described by French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, who writes, "The absolute nakedness of the face, the absolutely defenceless face without covering cloth or mask, is what opposes my power over it, my violence, and opposes it in an absolute way."[68] As Michael L. Morgan explicates, "The thing to remember in the face-to-face encounter between the self and the other person is that it is concrete and particular."[69] Such an encounter happens precisely in the act of portrait painting.

67
For an extended discussion of indigenist pictorial representation, see Tatiana Flores, Art, Revolution, and Indigenous Subjects, in: Carlos Salomon (ed.), *The Routledge History of Latin American Culture*, New York/London 2017, 115–129. On refusal, see Audra Simpson, On Ethnographic Refusal. Indigeneity, 'Voice,' and Colonial Citizenship, in: *Junctures* 9, 2007, 67–80.

68
Quoted in Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*, Cambridge/New York 2011, 68. I am grateful to conversations with Aliza Nisenbaum for introducing me to the work of Levinas. See Tatiana Flores, Aliza Nisenbaum's Agential Realism, in: Amanda Singer (ed.), *Aliza Nisenbaum*, Berlin 2019, 7–14.

69
Morgan, The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas, 59.

[Fig. 5]
Rosario Cabrera, Portrait of a Boy, 1921, oil on canvas, private collection, Mexico City.

[Fig. 6]
Francisco Díaz de León, Market Day, 1922, oil on canvas, 100 × 122 cm, colección Andrés Blaisten, Mexico City.

[Fig. 7]
Artists painting Luz Jiménez at the Coyoacán school (left to right: Ramón Alva de la Canal, Fernado Leal, Francisco Díaz de León, and unidentified man), ca. 1921.

One of the school's models was Luz Jiménez, later an icon of Mexican postrevolutionary art depicted by Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, Diego Rivera, and others.[70] She was a native Nahuatl speaker from a traditional community in Milpa Alta, in the Valley of Mexico and became a crucial interlocutor for artists. She was Leal's favorite model, and they became lifelong friends. In *India con frutas* (Indigenous woman with fruit, 1921) [Fig. 8], he poses her against a wooded background, holding a large bowl of fruit atop her head. The model's direct eye contact with the spectator contrasts with the demure downward gaze more characteristic of Indigenous men and women in their interaction with white or mestizo elites as seen in the Martínez Báez painting discussed earlier. The French painter Jean Charlot described Luz as possessing a double consciousness, in that she could inhabit the mindset of both the colonized and the colonizer:

> Now many of the other girls could put their village clothes on and pose with a pot on their shoulders, but they didn't do it, so to speak, to the manor born. And Luz had one thing that was important: she could do it both naturally, as the Indian girl that she was, and know enough so that she could imagine from the outside, so to speak, what the painters or the writers saw in her, and she helped both see things because of that sort of double outlook she could have on herself and her tradition. I think that not only in art but, as I said, in ethnology, she has been a very important link between past Mexico and present Mexico.[71]

Feminist critics have rightly highlighted the ways in which the Indigenous Mexican women occupy a doubly subaltern status, as women and Native.[72] Certainly, the image of Luz was instrumentalized in the service of Mexican state ideology, but this was not the case for all the artists who painted her. At the Coyoacán school, the experience of listening to Luz, rather than simply representing her, was formative for Leal, and it may have been his dialogue with her and other models that propelled his constant questioning of the power dynamics of the act of representing.[73] Un-suturing for him

70
See *Luz Jiménez. Símbolo de un pueblo milenario, 1897–1965* (exh. cat. Mexico City, Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo; Austin, TX, Mexic-Arte Museum), ed. by Instituto Nacional de Cultura y Arte, Mexico City 2000.

71
John Pierre Charlot, Twenty-Sixth Interview with Jean Charlot, August 7, 1971, *The Jean Charlot Foundation* (March 10, 2024).

72
See Adriana Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition. Women, Gender, and Representation in Mexican Art*, University Park, PA 2009.

73
A different interpretation on the relationship between Luz and these artists was advanced by literary scholar Natasha Varner. See Natasha Varner, *La Raza Cosmética. Beauty, Identity, and Settler Colonialism in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, Tucson, AZ 2020.

[Fig. 8]
Fernando Leal, India con frutas (Native woman with fruit), 1921, oil on canvas, 97 × 82 cm, photograph by Francisco Kochen © Fernando Leal-Audirac Collection & Archives.

became an ethical lifelong practice, and he employed it to advocate for disenfranchised communities both pictorially and through activism.

In *Campamento de un coronel Zapatista*, known in English as *Zapatistas at Rest* (1922) [Fig. 9], Leal composed a large multi-figural composition of five Native Mexicans, members of the peasant army of Emiliano Zapata, gathered together. Defying stereotypes of Zapatistas as violent warriors, the artist poses them at rest. Luz is included as the only woman in the scene, and she appears with a pot in the background, in a pose recalling a Toltec Chac Mool sculpture while clearly in dialogue with Western pictorial traditions. Considered the first painting of the Mexican Revolution, what many commentators overlooked is how the composition is deliberately artificial, quoting Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* (1863). In posing his sitters in a contrived manner, Leal predicted how images of Indigenous men and women would be instrumentalized in the service of Mexican state ideology. *Zapatistas at Rest* set the stage for the iconography of the mural movement, which was also prefigured by Leal's first mural *The Dancers of Chalma* (1922–1923). These monumental multi-figural compositions were birthed by a sustained engagement with the legacy of Impressionism and a dialogic relationship with the models that posed for them. The Coyoacán painters' immersion in Impressionism corresponds to Piotr Piotrowski's theorization of a horizontal, de-hierarchized art history that interprets such "influences" not as belatedness, but, as articulated by Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, as "very different ideas of what art could be and where the centre of reference could be, and a series of productive misunderstandings that meant that a relationship was still possible between these differing positions".[74]

When Rivera and Siqueiros, who had been in Europe at the end of the Revolution, returned to Mexico, they found a fertile environment that had flourished in their absence. Both artists came practicing and promoting the return-to-order neoclassical aesthetic that had taken hold in Europe after World War I. On their part, however, after their resounding rejection of the academy, artists allied with the open-air schools in Mexico could not easily be convinced that a reversion to academic tendencies was the direction they should embrace. They continued to promote the open-air painting schools as the key revolutionary initiative in art education. Ramos Martínez founded three additional schools in 1924. By the end of the decade, institutions designed to promote plein-air painting had become a full-blown experiment in alternative art pedagogies geared towards women and young people from disenfranchised communities, both urban and Indigenous. There were seven open-air painting schools, two schools located in urban centers, and a school of sculpture and

74
Joyeux-Prunel, Why Horizontal Art History Cannot Escape Computation, 197.

[Fig. 9]
Fernando Leal, Zapatistas at Rest, 1922, oil on canvas, 150 × 180 cm, photograph by Francisco Kochen © Fernando Leal-Audirac Collection & Archives.

direct carving. There were critically lauded exhibitions in Europe, but there were also a great many local detractors.[75]

To the artists that promoted the schools, they were a great democratizing project that gave people from marginalized communities the tools to represent themselves in a context where "Peasant", "Worker", and "Indian" had long since become abstractions. In an art history built on the cult of personality and the fetishization of objects, however, there was no room for proposals that argued that another world was possible. The Eurocentric narrative of modernism hasn't been able to conceive of other stories even when they are staring it right in the face.

III. Conclusion

The category of "global modernisms" links two fundamentally colonial constructs, one spatial, the other temporal. What we come to understand as global today came into being with the European discovery and colonization of the Americas, beginning in 1492. The very term "globe" has cartographic connotations, bringing to mind, not the planet itself, but the world as a collectible commodity. Similarly, the modern is premised on violence, dispossession, and death, but these conditions are routinely occluded. Instead, the attributes we associate with modernism are more in line with what Paul Gilroy described as "an innocent modernity [that] emerges from the apparently happy social relations that graced post-Enlightenment life in Paris, Berlin, and London".[76] At their most elemental, global modernisms replicate a center-periphery model of diffusion that reinscribes Europe. They have no place in a project of decolonizing art history because they reinforce European standards, which are not only deeply arrogant, but also violent and white supremacist. To operate within this category under the premise of "[*r*]*eversing* the terms of the conversation", Mignolo warns, "will not work, mainly because doing so remains within the same rule of game and play, yet under inferior conditions".[77] Instead, what is needed is to "*change the terms* of the conversation".[78] Decolonizing global modernisms means discarding them altogether and reconceptualizing the aesthetic object through a different set of parameters.

A way forward for Mignolo is through the practice of delinking, which "means not to operate under the same assumptions even

75
See Tatiana Flores, Starting from Mexico. Estridentismo as an Avant-Garde Model, in: *World Art* 4/1, 2014, 47–65.

76
Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London/New York 1993, 44.

77
Mignolo, The Darker Side of Western Modernity, 206. Emphasis in original.

78
Ibid.

while acknowledging that modern categories of thought are dominant, if not hegemonic, and in many, if not all of us".[79] One model he proposes, which works well with the examples from Mexico discussed above is "cosmopolitan localism".[80] It is tempting to close this essay with his own beautifully worded characterization: "Cosmopolitan localism means working toward a world in which many worlds would coexist."[81] But it is even more powerful to think back to the Mexican artists modeling this very praxis long before it was theorized. Fernando Leal, Lola Cueto, Rosario Cabrera, Franscico Díaz de León, Salvador Martínez Báez, and their contemporaries explored dialogic collaborative artmaking of care and repair. Conscious of their privilege and critical of the coloniality of art and life in early twentieth-century Mexico, they sought out forms of social engagement on the easel and beyond it, using every means at their disposal to engender a decolonial turn.

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79
Ibid.

80
Ibid., 209.

81
Ibid.

BEADING BACK AND FORTH

UPENDING TEMPORALITY THROUGH KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION

Carmen Robertson

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ABSTRACT

Knowing glass beads as active agents – as beings – proffers forms of analysis untethered from linear temporality and immersed in story. Analytical frameworks steeped in Western philosophical traditions dictate limited understandings of art made by Indigenous peoples within the study of art histories, and as displayed and collected by museums and galleries. Despite museological conventions that reproduce entrenched processes of objectification and linear classifications, appreciating Indigenous beadwork through relational and dialogical epistemologies has gained traction within the study of Indigenous arts in Canada. In support of future generations of Indigenous makers in the prairie region, this analysis upends conventional colonial structures of knowledge entrenched in institutions.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous art; Relationality; Kinship; Temporality; Archive; Museology; Beadwork; Prairies.

Curator Felicia Gay, a muskego inninu iskew from waskiganeek (Cumberland House, SK), maintains that "Story lives within the bead mikis (meegis), in our bodies, in our blood", when discussing the art of nehiyawak (Cree) artist Ruth Cuthand.[1] This assertion advances a mode for understanding beadwork as having a lifeforce and that can be understood as kin. Through the process of beading and sewing come understandings of the complexities of Indigenous knowing.[2]

I was taught that recognizing one's ties to land is vital to honoring enduring kinship ties to our human and more than human relations. In this essay I carry forward the responsibility that comes with such understandings in a discussion of beadwork from Canada's Flatlands or prairie region. As a woman of mixed ancestry, my connection to the land that is today known as Treaty Four territory in Saskatchewan, Canada is a complicated one. My matriarchal family are members of Dakhóta and Lakhóta Oyate, who struggled to make a home in the Qu'Appelle valley in the late nineteenth century, while settler branches of my family who arrived in this same area experienced privilege.[3]

Indigenous glass beadwork from the Flatlands has recently found great traction in galleries in this central region and beyond. A proliferation of exhibitions, including the national traveling exhibition, *Radical Stitch* (2022–2024), necessitates a reconsideration of conceptualizations of beading within conventional institutional settings. The conventional white cube galleries where Indigenous beadwork is now often displayed typically reinforces an objectification of art and conjures naturalized discourses of possession.[4] Objects hung on a wall or kept in a vault, narrowly appreciated aesthetically through a Western art lens, reproduce certain ways of seeing Indigenous arts that negate decolonial change. And while situating Indigenous arts within discourses of stasis and possession has been contested for more than twenty years by Indigenous curators and art historians in Canada and the USA, objectification has

1
Felicia Gay, *'Beads in the Blood'. Ruth Cuthand*, curatorial wall panel statement, Kenderdine Art Gallery, University of Saskatchewan, January 22 – April 10, 2021, np. I want to thank the many Aunties from the Flatlands I am so fortunate to know. Many of the ideas found in this essay have emerged over the years from our visits, panels, and beading circles.

2
I wish to thank Katherine Boyer, Ruth Cuthand, and Carrie Allison, artists featured in this essay, for their generosity in sharing their stories, their time, and their labor. I aimed to write in ways that would hopefully share some understandings of the Indigenous Flatlands, an area known as the Prairies or the Grasslands. The beading included here also shares stories that bring to life the interconnected ways Indigenous beaders sew together the past, present, and future of this territory.

3
I currently reside on Anishinaabeg aki, or unceded Algonquin territory, where Carleton University is located. I am an uninvited visitor from Treaty Four territory in Saskatchewan.

4
Bill Brown (ed.), *Things*, Chicago 2004, 471; Stephen M. Best, *The Fugitive's Properties. Law and the Poetics of Possession*, Chicago 2004, 362; Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (eds.), *Photographs Objects Histories. On the Materiality of Images*, London 2004, xi; 222.

not disappeared.[5] Knowing and appreciating Indigenous beadwork differently requires an openness to new ways of seeing and understanding that unsettles and complicates paradigmatic art historical systems, curatorial habits, and museological practices of collecting.

By intervening in the confining webbing that entangles understandings of Indigenous beadwork from the Canadian Prairies, I offer a close analysis of beaded art by Métis artist Katherine Boyer, nehiyawak and Scottish artist Ruth Cuthand, and nehiyawak artist Carrie Allison, who each maintain active art practices with ancestral connections to nehiyawak and Métis stories of the prairie homelands. As is the case with many Indigenous beaders on the Flatlands, these three artists are each part of a dynamic artistic movement that can be better understood within a multi-temporal frame of *being-in-time*, a fitting term advanced by Queer-settler scholar Mark Rifkin.[6] I borrow from Rifkin's conception of multiple temporalities in my understandings of how knowledge transmission and process defy linearity. Multi-temporality shifts the confining categorizations often associated with "traditional" or "contemporary" practices and acknowledges the ongoing innovation and adaptation of art as kin. This inquiry considers how situating Indigenous beadwork differently upends conventional archival and display practices, and activates story, both visual and embodied, as part of a decolonizing discourse.

I. Beads, Land, Decolonization

Fusing land and sky, labor and promise, ancestors and spirits, movement, home, and sovereignty, *Carry the Horizon with You* [Fig. 1] by Métis Katherine Boyer, from Saskatchewan, who lives in the Métis homeland of Manitoba, utilizes beads, wood, and paracord support to visualize the fluidity of time and Indigenous peoples who once routinely moved throughout the Prairies following the buffalo, tending garden plots, and, later because of the colonial imposition of national borders, crossing the imposed Medicine Line to seek haven. Today, because of colonization, Métis and First Nations peoples live on one side of a border or another. Nation making involves borders – lines inscribed onto land in temporal custom. Yet, the construct that is the Medicine Line or the Canada/US Border speaks to only one of the storylines beaded in this work.

The melding of materials and stories found in *Carry the Horizon with You* reveals a balancing act that Boyer constructs. Utility and functionality serve as an integral part of this complex Métis aesthetic, according to the artist, who notes that the work resonates

5
Lee-Ann Martin (ed.), *Making a Noise! Aboriginal Perspectives on Art, Art History, Critical Writing and Community*, Banff 2004; Jolene Rickard, Absorbing or Obscuring the Absence of a Critical Space in the Americas for Indigeneity. The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, in: *RES. Anthropology and Aesthetics* 52, 2007, 85–92.

6
Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time. Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, Durham, NC 2017.

[Fig. 1]
Katherine Boyer, Carry the Horizon with You, 2020, installation, glass beads on black stroud, paracord, fir wood, approx. 300 × 300 × 8 cm, Collection of the artist © Permission of the artist.

with her "experience of queering and Queer worldmaking" in the heteronormative settler nation.[7] The horizon is always evident on the land, stretching out ahead where earth and sky meet, where stories of creation connect with twenty-first-century stories of resilience. Trips to the hardware store and the bead store service the imagined and expansive sense of home built into this sculptural work.

The beaded strap held level with nylon paracord recalls the history of the tumpline used by the Métis to carry heavy loads long distances. Each bead sewn by Boyer into this functional strap contains intergenerational stories of movement and innovation. The symmetrical floral designs evoke reciprocal relationships with native plants, the adaptation of stylized designs derived from Boyer's archival research and artistic innovations. The work demonstrates the recognition of difficult labors that come with caring responsibly for the land and for relations in the past, the present, and carrying into the future.

Decolonization is an implicit narrative thread throughout Boyer's beading, as it is in the beaded works by Cuthand and Allison included in this analysis. Each of their arts practices relies on engagements with archival collections in museums – that is, beadwork caught within the confining organizational structures that restrain relational ways of knowing. Glass beads, which arrived in the eastern region of North America as early as 1820, were eventually traded in the prairie region as part of the fur trade and served a key role in ceremonies of exchange.[8] This made them ready objects for commodity and collecting.[9] In Cuthand's recent solo exhibition, *Beads in the Blood. Ruth Cuthand, a Survey*, curated by Felicia Gay in 2020, Gay reinforces a discourse around Cuthand's beadwork concerning lifeforce, that repositions beads and ways of seeing beads, explaining in her curatorial statement that "Cuthand believes the bead is alive...".[10] Such concepts challenge the ways in which beading has long been collected and housed in archival vaults. Trapped within colonial structures of time and Western ways of knowing art, and considered within a discourse of material culture, beaded works found in ethnographic collections often continue to be treated as relics of the past rather than as relations, who when visited, often share their stories. Beadwork made today can also be ensnared

7
Katherine Boyer, *How the Sky Carries the Sun*, artist statement, Art Gallery of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, February 2022, np.

8
Joel Monture, *The Complete Guide to Traditional Native American Beadwork*, New York 1993, 2–5; Marsha Bol, *The Art and Tradition of Beadwork*, Layton, UT 2018, 336.

9
Carmen Robertson, Land and Beaded Identity. Shaping Art Histories of Indigenous Women of the Flatland, in: *RACAR. Revue d'art canadienne. Canadian Art Review* 42/2, 2017, 13–29 (July 3, 2023).

10
Gay, Beads in the Blood, np.

within confining misunderstandings that bely the dynamics forged between the beader and the beads, caught up within concepts related to material culture and craft.

Decolonization remains a site for vigorous debate in academia today in ways that far exceed the parameters of this essay, though I contend that anticolonial and decolonizing narratives shift theoretical and practical formulations of Indigenous beadwork by situating them within Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, and for the purposes of this analysis help to explain how Indigenous ways of knowing are woven into beading practices. Lakhóta scholar Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra DeBruyn remind scholars of the need to speak frankly about colonial histories and the need to rethink concepts of temporality: "The connectedness of the past to present to future remains a circle of lessons and insights that can give us both the consciousness and conscience to heal ourselves."[11] This acknowledgment of "temporal sovereignty" is tied directly to story.[12]

As noted, Rifkin's *Beyond Settler Time* unpacks distinctions between "Native and non-native experiences of time [...] to facilitate possibilities for temporal sovereignty" to reconceive of notions of time by articulating forms of "being-in-time" that do not take settler formations as a standard for thinking through historicity or the present.[13] Still, the robust complexities of colonial systems entrenched in art institutions have largely served as barriers toward fully configuring discourses surrounding Indigenous beadwork, for example, displayed within galleries and collected and preserved in archival collections. Linear time frames tend to defang colonial practices because of the naturalized pervasiveness in museology and within the academic discipline of art history.

Decolonizing efforts also acknowledge the use of story as method. Sylix literary scholar Jo-anne Archibald (Q'um Q'um Xiiem), Waikato – Ngāti Mahuta, Te Ahiwaru scholar Jenny Lee-Morgan, and Garrwa and Barunggam scholar Jason De Santolo build on Archibald's earlier methodological framework coined storywork, reflecting the ongoing ways that story informs pedagogy inside and outside the academy.[14] Storywork applied to visual stories, such as those held by beaded artworks, informs and directs knowledge transmission, activating conceptions inherent in the

11
Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra M. DeBruyn, The American Indian Holocaust. Healing Historical Unresolved Grief, in: *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research* 8/2, 1998, 60–82, here 72.

12
Rifkin, Beyond Settler Time, 4.

13
Ibid., 4; 25.

14
Jo-ann Archibald, Q'um Q'um Xiiem, Jenny Bol Jun Lee-Morgan, and Jason De Santolo (eds.), *Decolonizing Research. Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*, London 2019; Jo-ann Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork. Educating the Heart, Mind, Body and Spirit*, Vancouver 2008, 5.

process and practice of beading. Utilizing the term "storying" as a verb, I argue, further captures the efforts to theorize the complex dynamics of narrative in this context. A beading circle, for example, or a sewing circle may serve as a catalyst for storying, where narrative threads related to knowledge transmission blend, bringing together temporal threads. A curated exhibition or an engaged group of students responding to a performative example of Indigenous art making also take part in the storying of knowledge. Interconnected with other ways of knowing, in the context of making art, the shifting of story from noun to verb, serves as a pedagogical agent. Storying activates relational understandings between living beings, in space and time, informed by the past, in ways that shape our present, and in the best of cases, helps to transform our futures.

Storying invigorates relational understandings between all living beings. Cherokee literary scholar Daniel Heath Justice positions story and stories beyond passive intergenerational stories long described as "tales" or "legends" within settler discourse. Heath Justice explains that kinship, like storying, "is best thought of as a verb [...] that link[s] the People, the land, and the cosmos together in an ongoing and dynamic system of mutually affecting relationships".[15] Kinship obligations reflect articulations of the dynamics of interrelated forces also manifest in Indigenous languages and other cultural expressions. I resist sketching an oversimplification of complex Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies here to avoid homogenized or monolithic conceptions of pan-Indigenous ways of knowing because kinship, as a translated concept, does not easily give up the complex interconnections particular to Indigenous languages. Shifting understandings of time and place in concert with kinship ties plays a pivotal role here in relation to art created by Boyer, Cuthand, and Allison, and I defer to Heath Justice who cautions that generalizations are "essential to the survival of imperialism, as complications breed uncertainty in the infallibility of authoritative truth claims".[16]

While scholarship contests conventional conceptualizations of archives, institutional collections mostly continue to reproduce structures that privilege Western forms of knowledge keeping. In *Duress*, historian Ann Laura Stoler assigns the conflicted and weighty term "duress" to how archival practices exert pressure on ingrained features of colonial histories of the present. Arguing that the connectivity of persistent colonial effects that "bear on the present" often escape scrutiny, Stoler challenges critics to ferret out these naturalized systems resistant to change.[17] The underly-

15
Daniel Heath Justice, 'Go Away Water!' Kinship Criticism and the Decolonization Imperative, in: *Reasoning Together. The Native Critics Collection*, Norman, OK 2008, 147–168, here 150–151.

16
Ibid., 155.

17
Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress. Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*, Durham, NC 2016, 5.

ing structures of archives, naturalized within the practices of museums and libraries, do not easily give up their scripted temporal systems; maintained through "their durable, if sometimes intangible constraints and confinements" that cannot be easily unpicked.[18] Unlearning as a concept has gained traction in a number of disciplines. For example, photography scholar Ariella Aisha Azoulay proposes unlearning as a process of disengaging from inherited systems of colonial imperialism that continue to shape present practices.[19] Unlearning processes and structures that reproduce concepts of stasis and possession in institutional archives is productive work, to be sure. These structural constraints impact understandings of Indigenous arts, also. The cataloging of Indigenous arts within institutional archives is complicated by enduring biases. Unlearning is only one aspect of the conceptual labor required, however, to understand beadwork differently and to account for Indigenous ways of knowing.

Conventional museum documentation surrounding Indigenous beadwork focuses mostly on ethnographically organized cultural groups and linear time periods attributed to the piece. Seldom is the maker or the significance of the work included in the archival record. Provenance, while important, tends to focus on information related to the collector or donor when the maker is unknown. As with discourses concerning archival practices, scholarly discourses surrounding art institutions include formulations for change. Art historian Ruth Phillips promotes policies of collaboration, hybridization, and experimentation in her call to Indigenizing Canadian museums.[20] Ho Chunk curator and scholar Amy Lonetree outlines new models for exhibitionary practice of Indigenous art histories in American institutions that promote collaborative processes.[21] Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls for Action, released in 2015, also includes specific directives for systemic change to museums, art institutions, and archives to work with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities.[22] The work of this directive progresses slowly.

Indigenous curators lead the way in rethinking how interconnected ways of knowing include relational ways of knowing. The

18
Ibid., 7.

19
Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism*, London 2019, 11–12.

20
Ruth Phillips, *Museum Pieces. Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*, Montreal/Kingston, ON 2011.

21
Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums. Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, Chapel Hill, NC 2012.

22
The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action, particular to museums and archives, include Calls 67, 68, 69: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Calls to Action*, 2015, 8 (July 21, 2023).

noted beading exhibition *Radical Stitch*, mounted in 2022 at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, was curated by Métis curators Sherry Farrell Racette and Cathy Mattes, along with Anishinaabe curator Michelle Lavallee, who, for example, resituate practices of beadwork beyond objectified forms of display, even as it enters white cube gallery spaces.[23] Sharing knowledge through stories and through visiting provides a powerful embodiment of multigenerational bodies of knowledge. Mattes, who conceptualizes a methodological curatorial approach based on wakootowin or kinship ties, extends theory into practice along with her co-curators of *Radical Stitch*. Métis Kitchen Table Talk (MKTT), a term she advances, serves as a culturally responsive methodology that Mattes suggests helps to encourage community members to bead and strategize around the kitchen table (a traditional site for engaged political and social debate), strengthening kinship and community ties among those gathered to shape curatorial directions.[24] This method of curation offers clear advantages for reconceptualizing how audiences engage with Prairie beading in gallery spaces.

II. Storying the Land/Storying Relations

As with *Carry the Horizon with You*, Boyer extends the storied connection to the beaded sky in *Sky Vest* [Fig. 2]. The focal point of this sculptural armature is a bespoke beaded vest patterned to fuse a link, according to Boyer, "between my body and the skies of places that have contributed to how I understand myself. These lands contain a resonance that covers generations, and in concert the sky is exclusively for me, is exclusively my perspective, my angle, and orientation."[25] *Sky Vest*, a sculptural installation, displays Boyer's elevated beaded vest within a skeleton of construction-grade wood that lifts the vest upward, extending understandings of home and kin, body, and story, within a twenty-first-century gallery context.

Locating Métis ways of knowing at the heart of every stitch in the vest is a clear reminder of ongoing innovations that amalgamate diverse clothing traditions as symbols of Métis identity. Boyer reinterprets and reimagines cultural signifiers that convey creative resilience. Embodying the cultural practices of visiting, she visited beaded works created by ancestors in museum collections such as at the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg, MB and in other archival collections across the Prairies. The added dimension of cloud forma-

23
Radical Stitch, MacKenzie Art Gallery, April 30 – September 25, 2022, Regina, SK (September 4, 2023).

24
Cathy Mattes, Wahkootowin, Beading and Métis Kitchen Table Talk. Indigenous Knowledge and Strategies for Curating Care, in: Elke Krasny, Sophie Lingg, Lena Fritsch, Birgit Bosold, and Vera Hofmann (eds.), *Radicalizing Care. Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating*, Vienna 2021, 132–143.

25
Boyer, How the Sky Carries the Sun, np.

[Fig. 2]
Katherine Boyer, The Sky Vest, 2021, installation, fir construction boards, glass beads on smoked moosehide, stroud cloth, approx. 450 × 500 × 200 cm, Collection of the artist © Permission of the artist.

tions that cover the back and pockets of the vest mark the strength of interconnections at play [Fig. 3]. As part of her artistic process, Boyer studies techniques and patterns, as she looks, listens, and stories ancestral designs and colors into her innovative artwork.

Métis and nehiyawak (Plains Cree) understandings of kinship signal meanings are inherent in interconnected relationships and underpin the artwork included in this essay. Métis Elder Maria Campbell from Saskatchewan beautifully captures the complexities of an ancestral language's contextualization of such a term:

> There is a word in my language that speaks to these issues: 'wahkotowin.' Today it is translated to mean kinship, relationship, and family as in human family. But at one time, from our place it meant the whole of creation. And our teaching taught us that all of creation is related and interconnected to all things within it.
> Wahkotowin means honor and respecting those relationships. They are our stories, songs, ceremonies, and dances that taught us from birth to death our responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to each other. Human to human, human to plants, human to animals, to the water and especially to the earth. And in turn all of creation had responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to us.[26]

The interconnected beaded flowers, berries, and white stems and vines on Boyer's vest function as more than decorative elements; they hold knowledge concerning medicine properties. The beads offer up gifts to make whole the deep and sacred notion of Wâhkôhtowin described by Elder Maria. Honoring beaded designs used by her grandmothers and aunties collected in archives, alongside Boyer's own unique and personal representations of skies tied to place, supported by utility and structure, *Sky Vest* enacts generational knowledge and embodies the ongoing, contemporary struggles to build one's home and a sacred sense of place.

III. Beads as Beings

When Ruth Cuthand first created her beaded *Trading* series in 2008, she sparked new ways to think about Prairie beadwork within a gallery setting, a shift that prompted galleries to exhibit beadwork as art rather than as artifact. Beaded diseases from this and subsequent series can today be found in museum collections throughout North America. The Saskatoon-based artist began the ground-breaking work by observing pathogens in the form of photographs taken through the oculus of the electron microscope. Cuthand included eleven beaded works in the original series to reinforce the destructive movement of diseases. Knowing beads as active agents – as kin

[26] Maria Campbell, We Need to Return to the Principles of Wahkotowin, in: *Eagle Feather News* 10/11, 2007, 5 (February 19, 2022).

[Fig. 3]
Katherine Boyer, Detail verso, The Sky Vest, 2021, installation, fir construction boards, glass beads on smoked moosehide, stroud cloth, approx. 450 × 500 × 200 cm, Collection of the artist © Permission of the artist.

to visit with – opens fresh ways to contemplate beadwork such as this in the gallery. Attentive to intergenerational stories while referencing colonial efforts that have severed ties and supporting stories of resilience, Cuthand's beaded diseases, mounted on black suede board with a scientific-looking stenciled white label, are both exquisitely beautiful with vibrant colors and shockingly repulsive, considering the devastating genocidal effects that resonated throughout Indigenous populations across Turtle Island.

The version of *Small Pox* reprinted here [Fig. 4], created in 2011 as part of the *Reserving* series, similarly references the smallpox pandemic in the Americas that Cuthand beaded earlier as part of the *Trading* series, estimated to have killed as many as 55 million people, according to historian and demographer Noble David Cook.[27] The epidemiological pathway of *Small Pox* is but one of the powerful narratives captured in the vibrantly beaded pathogen. Yet, genocidal impacts wrought upon communities and cultures with the spread of diseases are balanced by the resilience of Indigenous communities.[28] The beads that Cuthand expertly channels reference a millennium of stories of life on the Flatlands, of movement, of visiting, and of innovation. *Small Pox* exemplifies the diverse intersectional stories that resituate beads as beings rather than as objects. As holders of story, they transmit an ongoing myriad of narratives.

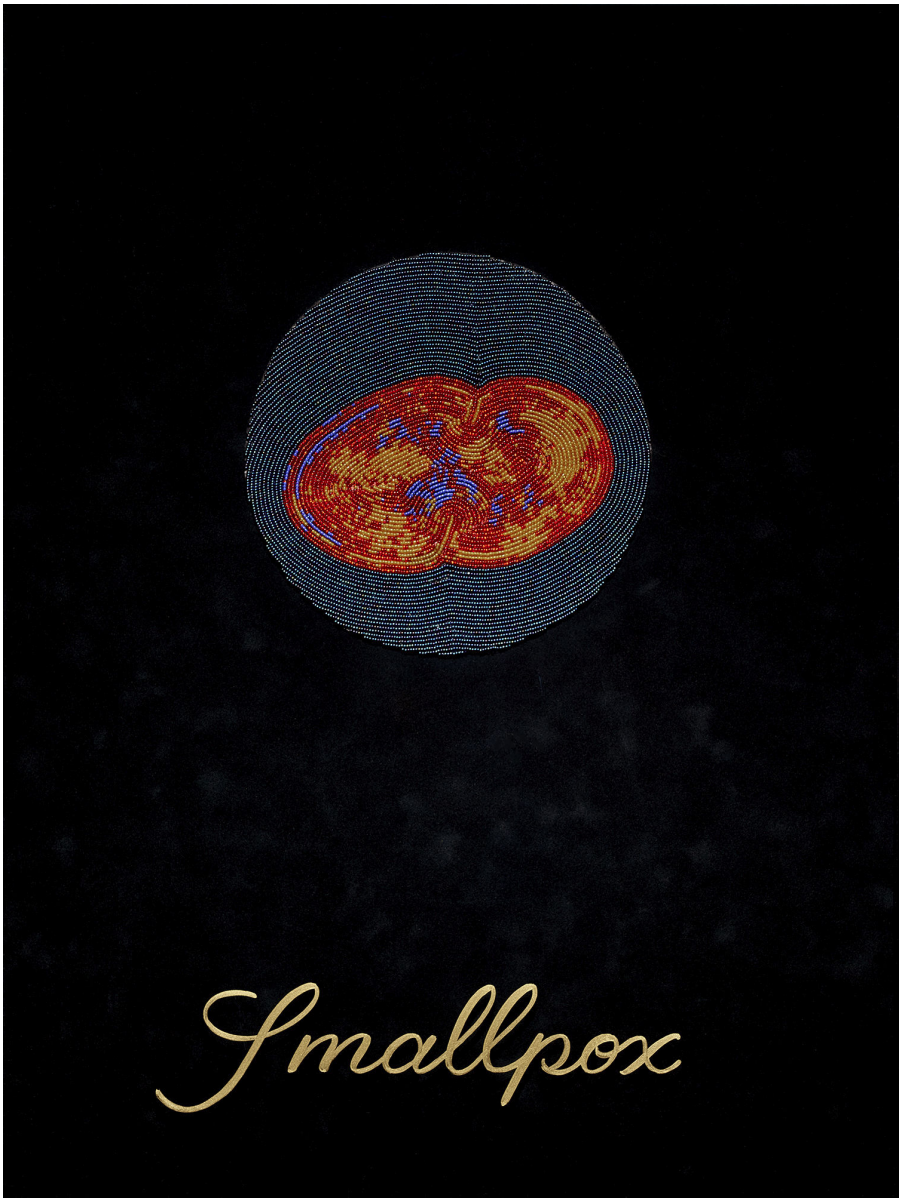
Cuthand also includes in the original *Trading* series *Syphilis* [Fig. 5], a sexually transmitted infection thought to have been taken back to Europe, a by-product of the Columbian exchange.[29] The medium chosen to represent *Syphilis*, porcupine quills harvested from a living relative or kin, reveals a fundamental sacredness adopted into the beading process used among Prairie beaders. Ancestors from the Flatlands often used this natural and other materials to adorn clothing and other utilitarian belongings. Cuthand eschewed the use of glass beads; instead she plaits naturally dyed porcupine quills in the ancient style, a technology maintained through intergenerational knowledge transmission among Plains Indigenous women. By situating quillwork within a series that is otherwise created using glass beads, Cuthand invites viewers to directly access a rich storied tradition of making and adornment directly linked to kinship ties.

Quills, used for millennia by Indigenous makers, require the application of a slow and painstaking technique associated with harvesting, flattening, and plaiting them. This technological process

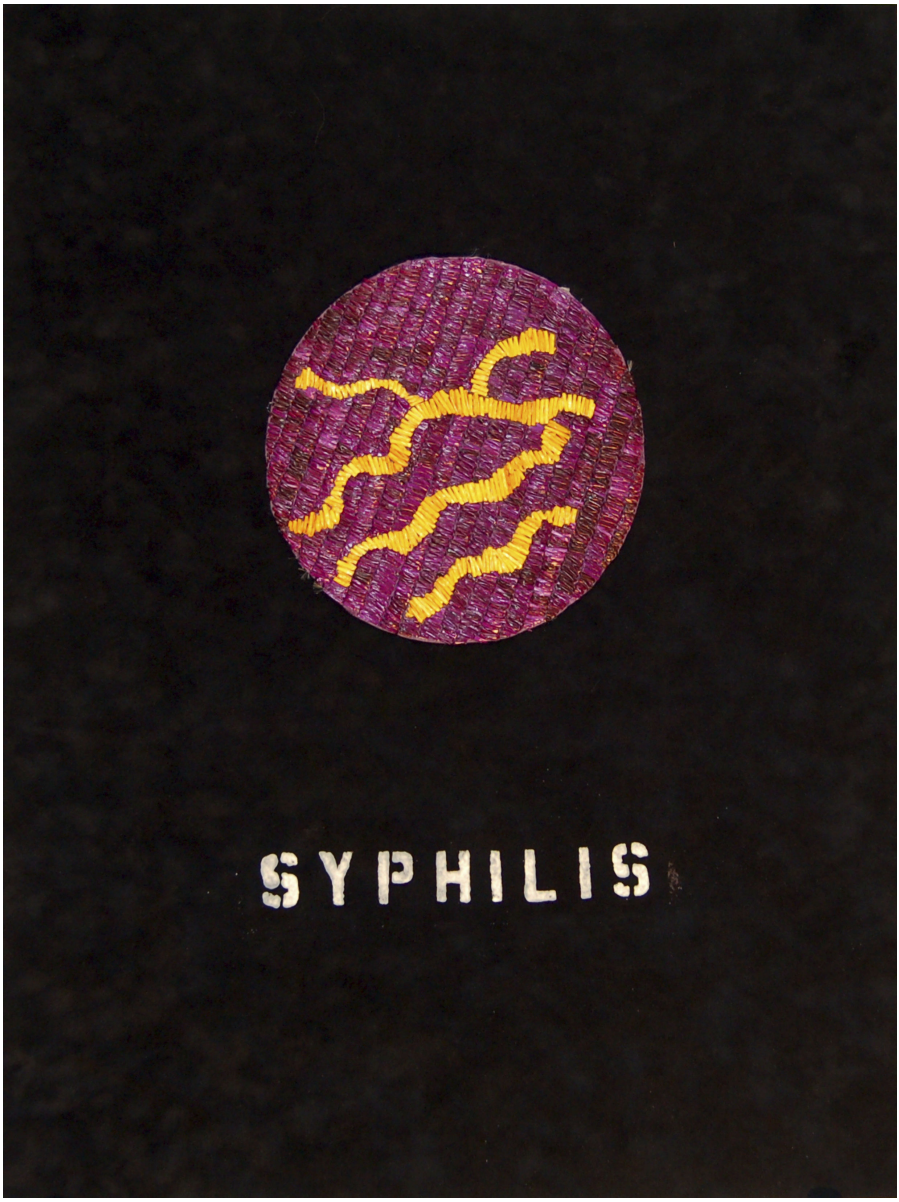
27
Noble David Cook, *Born to Die. Disease and New World Conquest, 1492–1650*, Cambridge 1998, 12; see also id., Sickness, Starvation, and Death in Early Hispaniola, in: *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 32/3, 2002, 349–386 (February 13, 2024).

28
For an analysis of how disease impacted Indigenous peoples in the prairie region, see: James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains. Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, Regina, SK 2014.

29
David Farhi and Nicolas Dupin, Origins of Syphilis and Management in the Immunocompetent Patient. Facts and Controversies, in: *Clinics in Dermatology* 28/5, 2010, 533–538.



[Fig. 4]
Ruth Cuthand, Smallpox, 2011, glass beads and acrylic on matboard with rayon flocking and acrylic paint in wood frame with glass glazing, 64 × 49 × 3 cm, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada © National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



[Fig. 5]
Ruth Cuthand, Syphilis, 2009, dyed porcupine quills and acrylic on suedeboard, 61.0 × 45.7 cm, Regina, Saskatchewan Arts Board © Saskatchewan Arts Board, Regina.

was a key aspect of design for Lakhóta women prior to contact as it was associated with sacred stories of Double Woman who appeared in the dream of a young Lakhóta woman on the plains and taught her how to use quills. The quills, harvested from porcupines, and therefore animate, hold stories because of their relational connections with land. Lakhóta and Dakhóta beaders today often mimic the linear, geometric designs of the quills as they pay homage to the gifts shared with them by Double Woman, making evident this form of storying accorded to the beading process.[30] While glass beads do not derive directly from land in the way naturally dyed quills do, beads have come to serve as kin in newly forged relationships within many Indigenous communities, and have been bestowed names within Indigenous languages commensurate with the role of story keepers.

Farrell Racette productively describes a process of "Indigenization" that occurred in the Métis homelands, where Métis women began to integrate and synthesize trade goods such as glass beads and fabrics into their knowledge system.[31] This process has also taken place in other Indigenous communities. Drawing on nehiyawak scholar Keith Goulet's analysis of lifeforce that "recognizes the capacity to give life and enhance survival as important aspects of the animacy", she demonstrates a practice that occurs in Indigenous communities across the plains and extends beyond beads.[32] Sharing a conversation with kisêyiniw or Elder Louis Bird in 2003, Farrell Racette explains how relationality has also been extended to trade goods. Woolen stroud cloth, made in England and traded along with glass beads, came to be called manitouwayan in Cree language, according to Elder Bird, who breaks down the term to reveal its complex meaning: "manitou", having an inner spirit energy, and "wayan", an application of the term skin because of the ability of this wool to absorb moisture.[33] The storied presence of both stroud cloth and glass beads reaches back but also illustrates the ongoing adaptation of new technologies that activate current processes of making, visiting, and sharing.

Cuthand's plaited quillwork and beaded diseases have spurred a reconceptualization of beadwork as viewers experience the aesthetic impact of this work beyond the confining and often stereo-

30
Janet Berlo, Creativity and Cosmopolitanism. Women's Enduring Traditions, in: *Identity by Design. Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women's Dresses* (exh. cat. Washington, D.C., Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian), ed. by Emil Her Many Horses, New York 2007, 97–148, here 102.

31
Sherry Farrell Racette, My Grandmothers Loved to Trade. The Indigenization of European Trade Goods in Historic and Contemporary Art, in: *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 20, 2008, 69–81.

32
Ibid., 71.

33
Ibid.

typical narratives of craft or Western concepts of beauty.[34] Recognizing beads as kin, as beings and as story keepers aligns with the ways Indigenous peoples on the Prairies (and beyond) understand quills and have come to *know* beads. The beads defy objectifying cultures of display in galleries and because the beads are alive, this understanding also runs counter to the conventions that classified beadworks held in permanent collections, as static objects confined to cabinet drawers.

IV. Kinship. Land and Water

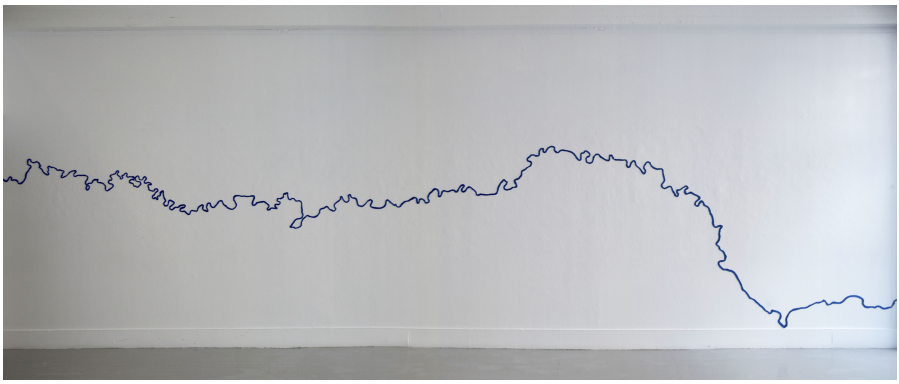
Honoring kin, in 2018, nehiyawak artist Carrie Allison beaded *Heart River* [Fig. 6], by sewing four strands of iridescent blue glass beads, that follow the undulating path of a northern Alberta river, and mounted it on a gallery wall. Tracing the flow of the river contends with more than geographic locators. The importance of water, territory, kin, and the flow of the river, in tune with the heartbeat of Mother nature, is conjured by this meandering collection of beads [Fig. 7]. The beads are keepers of story of family, of movement and migration, and of intergenerational knowledge transmission. "This work is an honouring," explains Allison, "this act is for the river."[35] The animacy of beads in this monumental undertaking are more fully revealed by the pathways of the beads that activate the timeless flow of water.

As the Heart River is part of Carrie Allison's Cree grandmother's home territory in northern Alberta, the beadwork forms an affective response to Allison's intergenerational connections with it. While the artist spent much of her life on Canada's east coast, her trips back to visit family inspired this beading project meant to embody place and stories. She achieves this through the process of beading. Learning her family history, visiting with the land, experiencing the sights, sounds, smells, the plant medicines, stories, and the slow process of beading, the concept of Wâhkôhtowin flows through *Heart River*. Using iridescent beads that sparkle like the watery kin it represents, Allison evokes the lifeforce of the river and the eleven-meter-long course of sewn beads mounted on a stark white gallery wall.

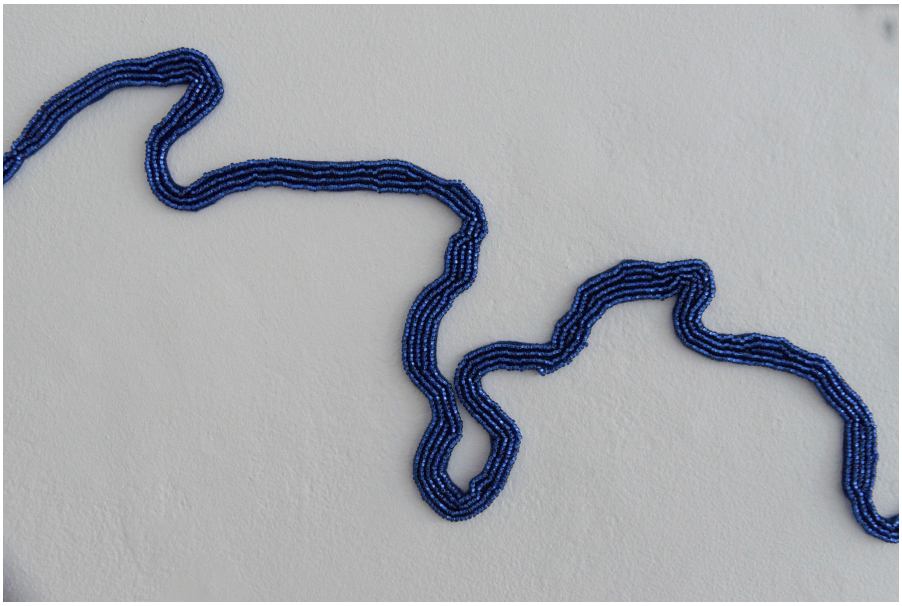
That rivers support and shape kinship ties is further confirmed by Tahltan performance artist Peter Morin, in discussing his 2013 performance, *this is what happens when we perform the memory of the land*. Morin explains that for the Tahltan, their traditional territory is, "shaped and transformed by the movement of the Sti-

34
For further images of beaded artworks from this series by Ruth Cuthand, see the artist's *website* (January 5, 2024).

35
Quoted in Carmen Robertson, Kinship. The Way in Which We Relate to Each Other, in: *Carrie Allison. Wâhkôhtowin* (exh. cat. Sackville, NB, Owen's Art Gallery, Mount Allison University), Sackville, NB 2019, 9–13, here 9.



[Fig. 6]
Carrie Allison, Heart River, 2018, installation, glass beads on blue felt, 11 m long, Collection of the artist © Permission of the artist.



[Fig. 7]
Detail of Carrie Allison, Heart River, 2018, installation, glass beads on blue felt, 11 m long, Collection of the artist © Permission of the artist.

kine River".[36] Allison's active shaping of Heart River's GPS-plotted pathway visualizes ongoing relational interconnections encompassed in the process, substantiating the role of beads as story keepers. The inexorable force of the water, channeled through the beads, uncovers the complications of fitting a work into a conventional exhibitionary structure.

V. Beading and Multi-temporality

Conveying a sense of balance, artworks discussed above carry with them a storied past, present, and future that reinforces decolonial discourses around Indigenous histories that posit multi-temporal formulations. Like Boyer's beaded structures, Cuthand's evocative beaded diseases and pathogens embody a range of stories about colonial histories while also holding stories of healing and communal action. Meanwhile, Allison's beaded *Heart River* evokes stories of resilience and enduring kinship ties. Storying land and water, kinship and resilience, these proffer opportunities for a reimagination of narratives through both cyclical forms of being-in-time and kin ties. The noted works suggest productive ways to consider artworks beyond a static formulation of conventional Western objectification and linear timelines by embracing multi-temporal forms of sovereignty resistant to naturalized colonial structures foundational to institutional archives and to the discipline of art history.

Small changes and partial solutions adapted and appended to institutional policies of colonial archives, of collections and displays, do not respectfully or responsibly honor the stories kept by the beads. Reordering ways of seeing in galleries and archives that contain beadwork to reflect cultural understandings requires more than a tweaking of colonial practices, to be sure. Such a decolonizing effort demands a turning away from the confines of colonialism's conceptual web. The discipline of art history, too, despite some positive realignments, continues to value Eurocentric conventions, including a cliquey adherence to canons of art. It is my hope that conceiving of beadwork through a lens of Indigenous relational epistemologies will contribute to activating narrative forms specific to Indigenous artists.

Carry the Horizon with You, *Sky Vest*, *Small Pox*, *Syphilis*, and *Heart River* serve as ready examples of beadwork that resist confining classifications imposed by settler institutions in order to shift and presage ways of seeing through Indigenous relational paradigms. Embodying storying processes exceeds the parameters of settler temporal frameworks. Visiting with the Indigenous Prairie beadwork discussed in this analysis reveals spaces of multiple temporalities and complex storying. The future is the main concern of storied beadwork.

[36] Peter Morin, This Is What Happens When We Perform the Memory of the Land, in: Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin (eds.), *Arts of Engagement. Taking Aesthetic Action in and beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Waterloo, ON 2016, 67–92, here 77.

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AGAINST EXTINCTION

AN INTERVIEW WITH SAHEJ RAHAL

Karin Zitzewitz

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
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ABSTRACT

An interview with Mumbai-based contemporary artist Sahej Rahal discusses the potential of artificial intelligence-driven simulations and images to engage issues of temporality. The interview considers the AI simulation *Anhad* (2023), in which a tripedal figure is both driven by noises in the gallery and creates a haunting song with each step. It examines the implications of the work's juxtaposition of various modes of temporality within and beyond an Indian political landscape dominated by a Hindu nationalist, authoritarian regime. Moving to a suite of AI-generated still images called *Black Origin* (2022), the conversation assesses the challenge artificial intelligence makes to photography. It contextualizes those images as they were presented in an exhibition that both reflected on the seventy-fifth anniversary of India's independence and speculated about the country's future.

KEYWORDS

Artificial intelligence; Futurism; India; Science fiction; Political aesthetics.

हद-हद करते सब गए. बेहद गयो न कोए. अनहद के मैदान में. रहा कबीरा सोए
Limits are all they speak of, and yet they dare not cross them,
I wait for you on the playground beyond those limits.
– Kabir Das, fifteenth-century poet and mystic

अनहद | *Anhad* | *The Unscalable* (2023) conjures a cybernetic ritual-site that confronts the limits of human scale against the immeasurable rhythms of sonic excess, opening pathways towards unscalability. The audience become active participants in this ritual, joined by non-human actors that present themselves as quasi-sentient beings driven by AI programs. Responding to audio feedback, a tripedal being is driven through a digital forest, with each foot carrying within it recorded notes of Hindustani classical music that modulate as the creature navigates the landscape. A narrator converses with the program, recollecting a tale of the world broken under the weight of measures. This audio feedback captured through a microphone, interrupts the movements of the creature causing it to change notes. Drawing upon the sonic chaos of the physical world, *Anhad* begins to generate an infinitely incomputable song, in a chorus of myth, machine, mind, and memory. *Anhad* unfolds at the cross-section of game design and storytelling, bending the constraints of each to create a regenerative and continuous ritual of mythmaking.

KARIN ZITZEWITZ: Anhad *[Fig. 1/Video 1] is the latest in your series of artificial intelligence simulations, through which you explore what might constitute life. At the center of each is an AI-driven being that uses machine learning to become better at navigating a landscape. Your experiments have led you to vary the form of the being, the computational motor of its movement, and the landscape in which it lives.* Anhad *is unique because of its relationship to music – here, the moves made by the figure also create a haunting song, which is set in* jugalbandi *(interactive duet) with a second voice.*

You begin this short introduction to Anhad *with a verse attributed to Kabir Das, a fifteenth-century poet who is claimed by adherents of both Sufism and Bhakti, which are Muslim and Hindu devotional practices, respectively. You invoke these words of Kabir's to introduce the concept of* anhad*, which you often translate as "unscalable", but which also means something like "without limit" or "infinite".* Anhad ke maidan*, a phrase in the second line of the couplet, could mean the "field of the limitless" or "the infinite playground". It could, in other words, refer to the Sufi "beyond", or the plane beyond rational thought that devotees seek to inhabit, because it is there that one comes closer to God. The first line of this couplet also comments upon a very human cowardice in the face of death, as life's most significant limit. All of this is quite provocative on its own, but it also brings to mind the definition provided by Arturo Escobar of the "pluriverse", a central concept of this*

[Fig. 1/Video 1]
Sahej Rahal, अनहद | Anhad | The Unscalable, 2023, simulation generated using artificial intelligence, video, 01:00 min. Courtesy of the artist (free access – no reuse), JUNGE AKADEMIE, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.
Online resource: http://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/#/detail/23866268

special issue project: "The pluriverse refers to the idea of multiple worlds but also to the idea of life as limitless flow."[1]

Escobar draws his idea of multiplicity principally from models of Indigenous thought, among other sources, which he advocates for as tools for the decolonization of knowledge. And so, it is something of a coincidence that his phrase, "life as limitless flow", is so suggestive of the materials you draw on. How much does his idea resonate with you in your work with artificial intelligence, which explores questions of what constitutes sentient life?

It seems to me that Anhad, *from among your set of AI simulations, is the most connected to this "flow" by virtue of its use of Hindustani classical music, which is the central musical tradition of the northern portion of the Indian Subcontinent. As an aesthetic realm, music is often caught between its own rational sonic nature – the rules of music – and its association with alternative forms of embodied knowledge – as a window to the sublime. How would you like to introduce this set of issues with regard to your work?*

SAHEJ RAHAL: Thank you, Karin, for opening us off on such a fertile terrain, and for introducing me to Arturo Escobar's phenomenal work! I found this unbound conception of "life as limitless flow" – emanating across a multitude of worlds – mirrors what the Sikh poet Harinder Singh Mehboob (1937–2010) is describing when he says "utte raag aa", meaning, there is music above us.[2] Mehboob, here, envisions the entirety of being in a continuum of music, resonating across space and time. Humankind, he says, has separated itself from this song, by carving categories into the continuum, through language. By naming himself Man, he separates himself from the World, and by naming the Other, he separates even from himself. These segregations conjure up an architecture of exteriorities, measured against the Man's own finitude.

Today, the lacerations of Man fester under the rampancy of machinic intelligence bolstered by the data mining of mega-corporations that provide only the illusion of connection, and state surveillance. Machine learning facial recognition tech maps movements of individuals. Weaponized snoop-ware stalks and silences journalists and intellectuals. Far-right internet trolls band together as "Trads" to cheer on the return of a falsified past. Matchmaker apps like "Betterhalf.AI" use machine learning algorithms to produce cis-hetero couplings based on an individual's curriculum vitae – propelling hegemonies of caste and class into the selfie panopticons of the future. An image of a planet as computable clockwork is regurgitated, and, by extension, all that lies upon it become mere

1
Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics. The Real and the Possible*, Durham, NC 2020, 26.

2
Harinder Singh Mehboob, *Poetics. Part Seven of Sehje Rachio Khalsa*, transl. by Gurtarn Singh Sidhu, Delhi 2020.

cogs in the monster machine, codified, categorized, and cut away from the whole.

Yet the very tools lulling us into inactive spectatorship hold unlikely trapdoors that land upon the terrain of unscalability. Drawing upon the song speculated by Mehboob, *Anhad* reconfigures the same tools that measure the mind, to create immeasurable rhythms of sonic excess.

KZ: Escobar goes on to qualify the nature of the pluriverse, by saying that it "does not assume that worlds are completely separate, interacting with and bumping into one another like so many billiard balls. On the contrary, worlds are completely interlinked, though under unequal conditions of power."[3]

I recalled this definition when reading your introduction to Anhad*, which presents two contrasting temporalities, both of which you wish to oppose through the provocation of experimental artificial intelligence: one based in a Hindu nationalist Indian state, or Hindu Rashtra, that imagines itself as Sanatan, a state of religious purity that constitutes "the all-transcending order of time itself", and the other, a transnational condition based in "the rampancy of machinic intelligence bolstered by mega-corporations today, [which] threaten to subsume the faculty of all conscious experience". Both of these temporalities, though they coexist, insist upon their own singularity and/or dominance, setting up temporal plurality as a distinct challenge. And yet, Escobar reminds us that it is not so easy to resist. Where might we find resources to capture these other modes of time?*

SR: This plurality of worlds, which Escobar conjures upon a billiard table, reminds me of the Sufi conception of the world not governed by a singular truth, but a collection of fictions that pour into and upon each other. If we consider these enmeshments and linkages between worlds that Escobar suggests as a cartography of tunnels, trapdoors, and escape hatches, they become unmapped openings charted upon the pluriverse, through which all sorts of strange things can leak, creating feedback loops, and unsettling the locations of power that seek to concretize themselves, or to put it differently, replace the real.

Instruments of state bureaucracy, and manifestations of technology produced by capital, assert themselves as such. What we are witnessing is a war waged upon reality itself, one that seeks to subsume all pluralities within a singular normative order. Let's consider this in terms of machine intelligence, in which a series of determined inputs are entered to produce a determined outcome. This cascading determinism, consequentially, produces a conception of thought, mind, and being itself as codified, categorized, and computable in a series of "if" and "then" statements.

[3] Escobar, Pluriversal Politics, 27.

Bodies become agents of causality capable of only responding with reactionary impulse. Undergirding this system of cause and effect is the projection of a firm and unmoving cohesive reality. However, this claimant to the real is far from absolute, being prone to slippages, glitches, and hacks that reveal the porosities of its structures.

KZ: Your ultimate concern, as you put it, is that "what we are witnessing is a war waged upon the shape of reality itself". Escobar, for his part, argues that it is, in fact, most important to "counter this ontological politics with a different politics based on multiple reals – that is, on radical ontological difference and pluriversality".[4] Is that a useful strategy in the Indian context?

SR: Let us consider the Hindutva schematic of the Hindu Rashtra: a mythical country drafted upon Indian contours. Hindutva insists that it represents the authentic India, as the sole inheritance of present-day Hindus by virtue of their birth, and excluding all others.

This archaic theater of nation-building enacted under a singular religiosity is itself a Western import. Born out of the European experience, following an era of religious wars. Evident in the formulations of nationhood undergirding the work of Locke, Rousseau, and Hobbes, there lies an implicit agreement, that as per the natural course of history, Germany could only exist as Protestant Germany, England as Anglican England, and Spain as Catholic Spain.

The architecture of this political theology is essentially incompatible with the heterogeneous confluence of cultures that has come to shape the Indian society, through a broad range of faith experiences that range across polytheistic, pantheistic, henotheistic, monastic, animist, Sufi, nature-worshiping, and even atheistic practices.

To graft itself upon this multitude, Hindutva weaponizes state machinery in the form of cultural erasures, pogroms, false incarcerations, police action, and the enforcement of Cold War-era citizenship laws. Intellectuals, academics, journalists, progressives, and students who challenge the state are systematically targeted and jailed with the silent sanction of the Supreme Court.

Under the virulence of Hindutva, the state now imagines itself as Sanatan, the temporal order of history itself. Absolute, eternal, and unmoving. It takes the shape of the trench, the roadblock, the endless spools of barbed concertina wire that lace the horizon lines of New Delhi. A temporal barricade, denying movement to all who seek to trespass the end of history.

Within this trapdoor of collapsing time, however, resistance has reconstituted itself in unscalable proportions of myth. A thousand eyes gather at Shaheen Bagh, where Muslim women, old and young, refused the imposition of the national register of citizens. At Jama

[4] Ibid., 15.

Masjid, a thousand hands rose in unison with the revolutionary Chandrashekhar Azad, holding the Indian Constitution against the sky. At the borderlands of the national capital, Sikh farmers were joined by citizens from across the nation to challenge the unconstitutional agrarian reform laws.

The gathering masses soon became the largest protest movement in the history of human civilization, withstanding storm, heat, plague, and expired teargas shells, for eighteen months, forcing the state to repeal the laws. Together, they became what the poet Harinder Singh Mehboob once described as Khalis Kudrat. An absolute force of nature residing beyond historical time, returning to challenge it with the turbulence of revolution.

KZ: Indian intellectual debates, especially those understood as "post-colonial studies", have identified as "subaltern" those actors whose thinking escapes colonial modernity, but typically argue that their voices are successfully excluded from power. An important recent piece by South African intellectual Suren Pillay has outlined how this sense of foreclosure has been opposed by thinkers who disdain the post-colonial *approach in favor of a* decolonial *one.*[5] *Like the student activists Pillay describes, these writers seek out, to propose a few examples, the Indigenous traditions of the Americas or Dalit life in India for imaginative resources for thinking otherwise.*

In essence, these thinkers struggle with the relationship between imagination and the workings of power. This question seems important to your project, which acknowledges colonial entanglement while exploring the political potential of radical difference not only through Harinder Singh Mahboob's Sikh thought, but also through Jalalul Haq's critique of caste, which he locates within Indian philosophy.[6] *Published first in 1997 but reissued in 2022, Haq's highly imaginative text suggests that the critique of caste is best done through Indian thought categories – i.e., it should be pursued on the grounds of philosophy.*

Your simulations of life deliberately undermine the central metaphors of caste hierarchy, an alignment of power and knowledge in which, as Jalalul Haq argues in The Shudras:

> *Inequality was ingrained as the natural result of the circumstances of one's birth; liberty, a privilege of the elite; and justice was simply another name for deep injustice, and the denial of equality and liberty. Varna, or the contingency of one's birth, was the dominant and all-encompassing idea, and any conceivable disturbance (in the forms of intermixing of castes) in this*

[5] Suren Pillay, The Problem of Colonialism. Assimilation, Difference, and Decolonial Theory in Africa, in: *Critical Times* 4/3, 2021, 389–416. See also Kajri Jain, Spooky Art History (or, Whatever Happened to the Postcolonial?), in: Tatiana Flores, Florencia San Martín, and Charlene Villaseñor Black (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Decolonizing Art History*, Abingdon/New York 2023, 315–330.

[6] Jalalul Haq, *The Shudra. A Philosophical Narrative of Indian Superhumanism*, Delhi 2022 [1997].

system (varna-sankara) was a personal tragedy and a collective disaster.[7]

How does your work resonate with this critique?

SR: The exclusionary imperative of the Hindu nation state, as Jalalul Haq elaborates, is premised on an eschatological framework that subsumes the human subject within the violent metaphysics of the caste system. The peculiarity of caste is such that, unlike other forms of bigotry and oppression, it is premised on a purely metaphysical belief system. An elaborate mythology imagines that at the center of the universe lies the body of the cosmic patriarch, the Vishwa Purusha. His head gives birth to the high caste Brahmins, his shoulders become the warrior caste Kshatriyas, his thighs become the Vaishya – the merchant castes, and from his feet the low castes are formed.

Mirroring the Cartesian theater of being upon which the many follies of the West have been enacted, the scissor of caste lends the mind primacy over the limb. The high-born Brahmins become "superhuman", having heaven-ordained access to power in the material realm. Conversely those born from the limb become subhuman, in a mythological system of oppression that is aimed towards those who find themselves at the bottom and outside the metaphysical hierarchy of caste.

If we attempt to locate the figure of the human within the Hindu state, she is nowhere to be found. Instead, we are met with a hollow shell that has been exhausted of all agency through a series of lacerations inflicted upon subject and society, upon state and citizen, upon myth and memory, and upon mind and limb. The faculty of reason, when located within confines of this disarticulated body, is merely an instrument of sectarian polemics.

Through my experiments with the AI programs, I chanced upon a possible suturing of these disarticulations, drawing upon the work of philosopher Reza Negarestani, in his explorations of Inhumanism and its revisionary potentialities.[8]

The Inhuman, as Reza elaborates, relocates reason as "alien vector" within the dissected body of humanism itself. It does so by framing the capacity for reason as an abstract protocol that is not intrinsic to the human, but has been functionally implemented by the techno-linguistic infrastructure of human culture. This revision, by extension, reconstitutes the idea of freedom as an "insurrectionary force" that has bootstrapped itself out of evolutionary pre-adaptations and reformatted the human species as a suitable processing platform.

7
Ibid., 253.

8
Reza Negarestani, The Labor of the Inhuman, Part I: Human, in: *e-flux* 52, 2014 (August 24, 2022), and Part II: The Inhuman, in: *e-flux* 53, 2014 (August 24, 2022).

Anhad stages a possible dialogue with this insurrectionary force of revision. We find ourselves, perhaps, as the last humans, witnessing an unfolding AI simulation. Behind the lens of an AI controlled camera framing the action, we follow a black tentacled creature wandering within a virtual biome; an arid landscape bleached in saffron fog, with overgrown mushrooms and mangroves, tearing through the digital sands. This being is not driven by a single brain but a collection of multiple AI scripts that are attached to the virtual bones within its calcified petroleum body and act as "proto-minds" that calculate, infer, and collectively recalibrate the movements of the creature.

Each script/mind is capable of "listening" to the physical world outside the program as well, by picking up audio cues through the computer's microphone. As a result, within the body of this petro-being, the hierarchy of mind and limb has collapsed, making them indistinguishable from each other in a complete recalibration of human senses.

Each run of the simulation is distinct. In some instances; when audio inputs of a certain intensity are registered, the creature begins bowing, kneeling, and unfurling and on rare occasions, diving beyond the bounds of the virtual world. As the weight of the creature shifts upon its tentacles, a note of an abstracted *raag* (musical scale) is fired, recorded in the voice of my friend Niyati Upadhya. With each step, the song begins to modulate as new notes are triggered, and when the weight of the creature is held upon two legs simultaneously, their notes begin to harmonize.

This music of minds that *Anhad* conjures emerges out of a chaotic feedback loop that spirals between sound and script. The simulation chooses how it responds to external sounds, as if it were driven by inhuman will, entirely outside of my hands.

KZ: Now, let's turn toward Black Origin *(2022), your portfolio of AI-generated images [Fig. 2–Fig. 11], and the way that they prompt us to look a bit more closely at AI as a representational mechanism and how it works. I am reminded of Harun Farocki's idea that the computational image is displacing the photographic or filmic images that had been at the center of his own work. As he notes,*

> *strange new images, which are somehow on the verge of competing with and defeating finally the cinematographic, photographic image, so that the era of reproduction seems to be over, more or less, and the era of construction of a new world seems to be somehow on the horizon – or not on the horizon – it's already here.*[9]

I wonder if you agree, or if your work might contest this point. Your images are so self-consciously filmic, referring as they do to the

9 Harun Farocki, Cinema, Video Games and Finding the Detail, Tate Shots, 2016, *YouTube*, April 15, 2016 (August 24, 2022).

[Fig. 2]
Sahej Rahal, Black Origin, 2022, digital collage generated using AI program, Courtesy of the artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.

[Fig. 3]
Sahej Rahal, Black Origin, 2022, digital collage generated using AI program, Courtesy of the artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.

[Fig. 4]
Sahej Rahal, Black Origin, 2022, digital collage generated using AI program, Courtesy of the artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.

[Fig. 5]
Sahej Rahal, Black Origin, 2022, digital collage generated using AI program, Courtesy of the artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.

[Fig. 6]
Sahej Rahal, Black Origin, 2022, digital collage generated using AI program, Courtesy of the artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.

[Fig. 7]
Sahej Rahal, Black Origin, 2022, digital collage generated using AI program, Courtesy of the artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.

[Fig. 8]
Sahej Rahal, Black Origin, 2022, digital collage generated using AI program, Courtesy of the artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.

[Fig. 9]
Sahej Rahal, Black Origin, 2022, digital collage generated using AI program, Courtesy of the artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.

[Fig. 10]
Sahej Rahal, Black Origin, 2022, digital collage generated using AI program, Courtesy of the artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.

[Fig. 11]
Sahej Rahal, Black Origin, 2022, digital collage generated using AI program, Courtesy of the artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.

imaginative – constructed – space of science fiction. But even the found images that Farocki typically uses were themselves "constructed" in dialogue with historical forms of representation.

In our first conversations, we talked a bit about how you have begun to put more and more emphasis on the construction of landscapes – whether they reflect Indian coastal geographies, for instance. That made me reflect on W. J. T Mitchell's fantastic history of landscape painting in relationship to imperialism. As he argues, "even the most highly formulaic, conventional, and stylized landscapes tend to represent themselves as 'true' to some sort of nature". He associates this with the "double semiotic structure of landscape – its simultaneous articulation and disarticulation of the difference between nature and convention – [...]" and concludes that

> *the historical narratives they generate, are tailor-made for the discourse of imperialism. [...] Empires move outward in space as a way of moving forward in time; the 'prospect' that opens up is not just a spatial scene but a projected future of 'development' and exploitation.*[10]

It occurs to me that the science fiction sources you draw upon most readily – Star Wars *with its Imperial Walkers and colonized Ewoks and* 2001: A Space Odyssey *with its plural evolutionary timelines – knowingly and very cleverly use idealized landscapes as a crucial representational tool.*

SR: If we were to examine the tools and techniques employed in the construction of perspective in the Western canon of landscape painting, we would be confronted with a horizontal line, moving anxiously towards us from the distant edges of time, and shattering upon the iron canvases of the Cold War. The projections of conquest that once lay at the far end of the picture plane now make incursions into all that was being projected upon. The flattening of this distance between the real and the represented gave birth to a claustromaniacal entity construed from a science of fictions, known to us today as multimedia advertising.

The algorithmically augmented economies of distraction that churn within this beast seemingly confirm Farocki's wager. However, I do not see them as absolute, given their propensity for glitches, hacks, and data leaks. These breakages appear across the structural framework of the systems, become fractures in the foreclosed futures they seek to establish.

The AI image-generation programs that I used to create the portfolio of otherworldly landscapes was fed images from my own website, and screenshots of my AI simulations and videos, creating a strange mirror, within the unfolding narrative universe underlying my practice. One could imagine this as the consequence of one

10
W. J. T. Mitchell, Imperial Landscape, in: id. (ed.), *Landscape and Power*, Chicago 2002, 7–34, here 16–17.

species of artificial intelligence attempting to comprehend another. Now the AI generators I'm using are still quite limited in the images they create. They are unable to reproduce hyperreal representations of what they are looking at, they are incapable of rendering accurate facial symmetry or differentiating between shadow and texture, or shape and contour. As a result, the generated images seem to carry a strange impressionistic quality, even while attempting photo realism. This game of code and mirrors ends up creating a visibly inconsistent and unreal version of reality, made up of divergences that resist the totalizing vision of a cohesive structure.

KZ: Indeed, these images, as well as the simulations, trouble the edges of artificial intelligence. They push us to contemplate both the productivities and the limits of these technologies, not to mention the parameters of sentience or what might constitute "the real". That reminds me, again, of Escobar's goals for pluriversal thinking, which are to free ourselves from the forms of knowing that ground the so-called real – structuring things, like the nature of time and space – in order to provide better resources for exploring what might be possible. Escobar's approach is to gather and explore cultural materials that might provide alternatives, and to do so as broadly as possible; your work shares this impulse. His imaginative exercise is political both in the sense of being engaged in questions of power and in the sense of attempting to bridge between imaginative possibilities and achievable strategies. That is the role he has taken on as a political anthropologist. Is it one you accept as an artist?

SR: Thank you so much for sharing this with me Karin, I'm really struck by this conception of "a gathering of the real" that underlies Escobar's pluriversal thinking. I'd like to share with you an event that unfolded recently where I saw this happen in a very physical sense. My fellow artist, Pratik Modi was recently invited to host an exhibition of his own work as part of an event called *People's Freedom 75*, which was organized by a group of progressive activist organizations in Mumbai. Pratik instead decided to open that conversation to a multitude of voices instead of doing a solo show. And together with him and more of our artist friends from Borivali, an area of the city with a thriving community of young artists, we organized an exhibition where we invited over eighty artists, theater performers, musicians, poets, and filmmakers, from all across the country to join us in examining the past seventy-five years of Indian independence, in order to reflect upon the history of people's movements that continue to shape and safeguard Indian democracy, and to collectively envision what comes next, both in an imaginative and in a material sense. The work that we received from them became part of a collectively created installation that, over the course of the five days of the event, was constantly transforming to move between a performance stage, a screening space, and a library. On the final day of the exhibition, we invited environmental activists and musicians who have been organizing the ongoing protests in Aarey Milk Colony to lead the day and speak of the ecological crisis

that is occurring in the heart of the city. To my mind, the event in its entirety became a gathering of realities that were unfolding upon each other.

We included my AI program *finalforest.exe* and the portfolio of AI-generated images, *Black Origin*, in the show. I was particularly excited to install the images on the entire length of the windows of the room. This made their scale mimic the horizon of the cityscape outside, creating a strange transposition of a flooded future upon the present, while *finalforest.exe* moved to the rising chants of *Azadi* (freedom) inside the building.

Sahej Rahal is a storyteller who weaves together fact and fiction to create counter-mythologies that interrogate narratives shaping the present. Rahal's myth world takes the shape of sculptures, performances, films, paintings, installations, video games, and AI programs, that he creates by drawing upon sources ranging from local legends to science fiction, rendering scenarios where indeterminate beings emerge from the cracks in our civilization. Rahal's participation in group and solo exhibitions includes the Gwangju Biennale, the Liverpool Biennial, the Kochi Biennale, the Vancouver Biennale, MACRO Museum Rome, Kadist SF, and CCA Glasgow. His AI simulations have been exhibited as part of WORLBUILDING Exhibition organized by Hans Ulrich Obrist at the Julia Stoschek Foundation, ACCA Melbourne, Akademie der Künste, Berlin. He is the recipient of the Cove Park/Henry Moore Fellowship, Akademie Schloss Solitude Fellowship, the Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation Installation Art Grant, the Digital Earth Fellowship, and the first Human-Machine Fellowship organized by Junge Akademie ADK.

Karin Zitzewitz is a specialist in the modern and contemporary art of South Asia. She is the author of *Infrastructure and Form. The Global Networks of Indian Contemporary Art, 1991–2008* (2022), *The Art of Secularism. The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India* (2014), and *The Perfect Frame. Presenting Indian Art: Stories and Photographs from the Kekoo Gandhy Collection* (2003). She curated exhibitions by Pakistani artist Naiza Khan (2013) and Indian artist Mithu Sen (2014) for the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University. Her research has been supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, the American Institute for Indian Studies, and the Fulbright program. She is a former Chair of the editorial board of *Art Journal* and *Art Journal OPEN*. Zitzewitz is Professor and Chair of the Department of Art History and Archaeology at the University of Maryland.

ANIMATING THE INANIMATE

QIU ANXIONG'S *NEW BOOK OF MOUNTAINS AND SEAS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the first installment of Qiu Anxiong's trilogy of animations *New Book of Mountains and Seas* (2006, 2008, 2017). Replete with fantastical creatures, Qiu's films immediately call to mind their namesake, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, an encyclopedia of strange beasts written and compiled between the fourth to first century BCE. His animations show the contemporary world as if seen through the eyes of someone living thousands of years ago, alive during the time of the original classic. Rather than casting this subject-position as "irrational" and backwards, Qiu mines the generative possibilities of adopting this new logic of perception. In doing so, he brings together two distinct ways of presenting the world. The first relays the modern myths and universal assumptions constituting our contemporary reality. The second destabilizes divisions between the animate and inanimate to challenge how this narrative led to the disavowal of animism to begin with. In restituting animism, the artist offers an alternative to the pictured story of predation, extraction, and consumption.

KEYWORDS

Animism; Animation; Qiu Anxiong; Contemporary Chinese art; Contemporary art; Decolonial; Decoloniality; Environment.

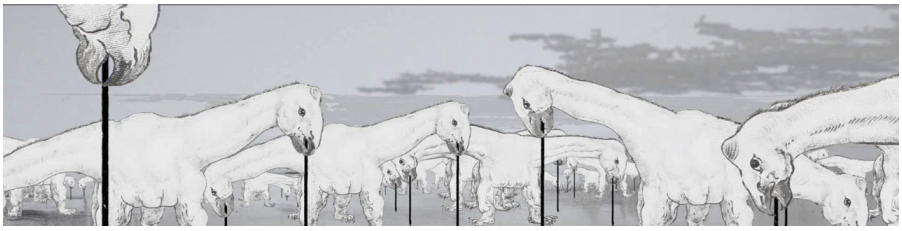
I. Introduction

A dazzling array of creatures populates Qiu Anxiong's *New Book of Mountains and Seas* (*Xin Shanhaijing*). In its representation of strange beasts, Qiu's trilogy of animations (2006, 2008, 2017) follows in the footsteps of its namesake, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing*). The original text, hereafter referred to as the classic, was written and compiled between the fourth to first century BCE.[1] It presents the world as a central territory with water and land extending in the four cardinal directions. It has entries for more than five hundred creatures organized according to whether they are found within or beyond the directional mountains and seas. Difficult to pin down, the classic has been variously referred to as a cosmography, bestiary, mythology, source about the occult, and more. Its elusive nature has contributed to its survival over the centuries. With its colorful assortment of enigmatic creatures and deified beings, the classic has continually captivated audiences with its descriptions of seemingly otherworldly phenomena within this universe. Qiu's *New Book of Mountains and Seas* elicits the same sense of wonder that contemporary readers experience when encountering the ancient text. It's like looking through a window onto a different world.

His animations, however, do not depict a primordial past. Instead, Qiu imagines someone on the other side of that window looking in at us: he presents our contemporary world through the eyes of someone who lived at the time of the classic. By preserving the original text as a marker in time, he shares what it would be like to operate using an entirely different set of logical assumptions. That is, creatures that we might nowadays consider to be machines – cars, helicopters, submarines, oil rigs, and such – would visually and conceptually be interpreted as living beings to someone from thousands of years ago. Thus, in Part I of the trilogy (2006), carapaced vehicles guzzle gas, giant scorpions drill deep into the earth, and equines bob tirelessly for oil [Fig. 1]. In the ensuing clashes over these natural resources, predatory birds alight on spinning helicopter-like wings, steely-eyed porpoises periscope up, and elephant-headed tanks extend their barrel-trunks to fire [Fig. 2]. The marvel elicited by these curious creatures juxtaposes starkly with the bleak subject matter of the film.

Focusing on the first installment of the trilogy, this paper analyzes the artist's two distinct ways of presenting the world: a dystopic plot that follows the global energy crisis and a primordial point of view that renders it full of strange creatures. I study each in turn to show Qiu's inquiries and interventions into the universalized assumptions and modern myths that constitute our contemporary reality. First, I examine the rich references – from scientific materialism to techno-optimism – that Qiu weaves into his scenes of

[1] For more on the classic, see Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary. Strange Creatures from the Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, Berkeley, CA 2002.



[Fig. 1]
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 10:58 © Qiu Anxiong.

[Fig. 2]
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 17:11 © Qiu Anxiong.

environmental exploitation and war. His interest in uncovering how we have arrived where we are leads him to picture the historical events and contemporary conditions that have resulted in a world ruled by consumption and competition. I then explore the different ways in which he uses animism to enable viewers to see this same world anew. In its study of the tensions between what is animate and inanimate, *New Book of Mountains and Seas* rehabilitates ways of thinking that invite viewers to question accepted determinations of what is alive and what constitutes reality.

II. From Double Helix to Mushroom Cloud

The first indication that a different perceptual logic is at play occurs four minutes and twenty seconds into the film when a vaguely aquatic creature glides onto the screen [Fig. 3]. Up until this point, Qiu presents a series of ink landscapes and cultural monuments to relay an abbreviated history of China. In it, he includes a bird chirping on a branch and a figure tilling the fields, both of which indicate a changing relationship with nature, but neither of which appears out of the ordinary. Thus, when a flying sea creature drifts over the Great Wall, its alienness is particularly striking. Even more so in the following scene when it pauses above a Spirit Path and releases a small wooden box. Something even more startling leaps out: a double helix. As this foreign form springs down the path, the screen fades to black. It is only after this prologue that the story rolls out a bevy of bizarre beasts, all toiling away in urban spaces, oil refineries, and industrial processing plants. Marking the divide between these two contrasting epochs, the floating orca-like creature and its enclosed double helix core are deliberately meant to throw viewers off-kilter. According to Qiu, they are "a description of Western colonialism".[2]

It's no coincidence that the fins and wings on the flying creature resemble a ship's sails and oars. Qiu states that they refer to the fifteenth-century European sea voyages that began "colonialism as a process of globalization".[3] The double helix, meanwhile, represents what he regards as the West's most efficacious vehicle for worldwide expansionism: science. His linking together of science and colonialism implicates a founding narrative in the history of science and modernity. It's one that positions "the Scientific Revolution as the Great Divide separating the West from the Rest".[4] In it, science serves as both the justification and ideological apparatus by which

2
Qiu Anxiong, interview by author, January 5, 2015.

3
Ibid.

4
Lorraine Daston, The History of Science and the History of Knowledge, in: *KNOW. A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 1/1, 2017, 131–154, here 134.

[Fig. 3]
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 04:36 © Qiu Anxiong.

the West modernized so-called backwards cultures. Elaborating on this in 2005, Qiu described Western science thusly:

> Taking proof as the basis of truth, the West made science the order of the day. Darwin's theory of evolution [...] instigated a new order of materialist belief [...]. This narrative of the natural world gradually became a gospel principal of life and eventually the governing philosophy of human existence.[5]

In citing materialism (*weiwuzhuyi*) as the root of Western science, Qiu emphasizes the necessity of "proof" in explanations of life and the natural world. Materialism's focus on rigorous methods of observation, practice, and testing for determining truth vehemently rejects any appeals to spiritual intervention. This combative stance against the divine was as central to advancing modern science in fifteenth-century Europe as it was in succeeding centuries of colonial expansion when existing epistemologies – now deemed "superstition" – were systematically hollowed out and replaced by a universal faith in scientific reasoning. As Arturo Escobar argues: in this process of universalizing universality – "one of the pillars of Western modernity" – the world became something "only modern science can know and thoroughly study".[6]

As the discovery of DNA structure didn't occur until the mid-twentieth century, its pairing in the animation with fifteenth-century maritime colonialism represents the increasingly expansive terrains that were – and continue to be – infiltrated by a materialist philosophy of human existence. The double helix marks the eventuality of an ever-widening application of modern science where even human beings are broken down to bio-physical structures composed of genetic sequences. Changes over time are, moreover, rationalized as a matter of replicated patterns, inherited material, and occasional mutations. The double helix thus participates in a sweeping history about "scientific advancement" that supports – and is supported by – appeals to materialist structures, natural laws, and evolutionary theory. Qiu's depiction of science as a Western colonial export connects it to the spread of modernity's rhetoric of progress and its complicity with history-writing.

The film's five-minute prologue quite deliberately concludes with the double helix landing on a Spirit Path, a path leading to a tomb.[7] This scene portends a funereal end to not only the Chinese empire, but also attendant belief systems – particularly ecological – that flourished at the time. For example, the harmonizing objectives of *fengshui* (literally "wind and water") that undergirded

5
Qiu Anxiong, *New Classic of Mountains and Seas*, 2006 (January 25, 2024).

6
Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics. The Real and the Possible*, Durham, NC 2020, 26.

7
Qiu, interview, 2015.

the construction of court structures and tombs. Erected according to relational understandings, directional orientations, and energy flows, these edifices became part of a sacred landscape. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when European powers sought to secure rights for building railroads and mines in China, they posed a direct threat to not only the land itself, but also supporting cosmologies. Chinese officials cited popular geomantic beliefs as a tactic for resisting foreign aggression. The first Chinese ambassador to Germany, Liu Xihong, wrote in 1881:

> Westerners do not know of the gods of the rivers and the mountains. Every time they attempt to make a railway that is blocked by the mountains, they use dynamite and other explosives to tear open a hole in its belly [...]. If railways were to be connected to cities, this would upset the placement of tombs and mausoleums.[8]

Liu describes here an environment governed by relationships between human and non-human entities. His allusion to the mountains as pulsing with life directly conflicts with Western views of land as inert and ready for occupation. Deemed "irrational" and "superstitious", *fengshui* met the same fate as other casualties of Western expansionism and its universalization of modern scientific classifications.

Throughout the prologue, Qiu ushers viewers through a history that engages multiple ways of interacting with the environment. For example, in his turn to the language of ink landscapes, or *shan-shui* (literally "mountains and water"), the artist recalls the layering of long hemp-fiber strokes by Huang Gongwang (1269–1354), the sparse compositions of Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), and the diffuse dots of Mi Fu (1051–1107). As the camera lingers on each scene, viewers take in the endless permutations of lines and wash, paired with manipulations of brush and ink, that have been used to communicate nature's own infinite range of organic diversity. Quickly, however, these landscapes recede and become backgrounds for human action and the built environment. Those same painterly ruminations on nature transform into physical sites for inhabitation, imperial grandeur, and agrarian cultivation. Stone walkways and guard towers punctuate previously rendered mountain ranges to form the Great Wall of China. An ornate gate is built on an empty patch of land to establish a courtly presence. As Jonathan Hay argues in his study of Ming-dynasty Beijing, even as rulers engaged in deforestation,

> human beings understood themselves to be in constant interaction with non-human activity and movement. As a

[8] Liu Xihong, Liu Guanglu (Xihong) Yigao, in: *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan sanbian* 446, 1988, 76–77. Passage translated in Albert Wu, Superstition and Statecraft in Late Qing China. Towards a Global History, in: *Past & Present* 255, 2022, 279–316, here 281.

> form of ecological awareness, this is very different from our own [...] it possessed its own sharpness of vision – perhaps a stronger sense of connectedness [...].[9]

Qiu signals the end to this form of awareness as the aforementioned Spirit Path extends outward from the gate and an explicitly mortuary structure takes shape.

These disparate ways of treating the work's titular mountains and seas are thrown into relief when we witness the following scenes that turn water and land into explicit sites of exogenous violence and violation. Bridging the two is China's experience of colonialism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Qiu describes:

> Opium, weapons, capitalism, churches, science and technology, ideology, political idealism all these things rode the waves across the ocean and disembarked on these shores. Facing the aggression of colonialism, the Chinese [...] were helpless against the will to wrench open the borders.[10]

Due to Western assertions of extraterritorial rights and financial exploitation through unequal treaties, China is often referred to as having been "semi-colonized".[11] The prologue points to the specific epistemologies and cosmologies that were impoverished when Western countries forcibly opened up China's treaty ports.

In tracing the connections among colonialism, science, and the present, it is useful here to consider Walter D. Mignolo's elaboration on the historical centrality of the "myth of universal science". That is, how time and science have been used to justify "epistemic colonial and imperial differences".[12] As a tool for stoking fears of belatedness and fueling the urgency to catch up, time presses differences into a "comparative point of view that allows for the erasure or devaluation of other forms of knowledge".[13] Indeed, the prologue shows exactly this: the kinds of beliefs that were devalued and disavowed due to Western modernity's configurations of time and scientific reasoning as metrics of advancement. In this light, the transition from the prologue to after does not merely represent a

9
Jonathan Hay, Green Beijing. Ecologies of Movement in the New Capital, c. 1450, in: Craig Clunas, Jessica Harrison-Hall, and Luk Yu-Ping (eds.), *Ming China. Courts and Contacts, 1400–1450*, London 2016, 46–55, here 54.

10
Qiu, New Classic.

11
Jürgen Osterhammel, Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire in Twentieth-Century China. Towards a Framework of Analysis, in: Wolfgang J. Mommsen (ed.), *Imperialism and After. Continuities and Discontinuities*, London 1986, 290–314.

12
Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity. Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham, NC 2011, 161.

13
Ibid., 171–172.

shift in perspective from a China-centered world to a Western-centered world, but can be more broadly understood as the suppression of multiplicity through the imposition of universality on a global scale.

As Anibal Quijano, Mignolo, and other decolonial theorists have argued, even after the period of colonization, its logic continued through coloniality, or the colonial matrix of power. The main plot of *New Book of Mountains and Seas* explores precisely this in its focus on predation, extraction, consumption, and domination. This story is primarily told through depictions of oil drilling, refineries, and manufacturing. When a cache of oil barrels is bombed, escalating scenes of violence explode and culminate in a grisly nuclear end. Amidst the many curious creatures carrying out oil production and warfare, Qiu depicts two particular groups that stand out as most human-like in their appearance. In the three-channel film, they appear to face off against each other [Fig. 4]. On the left side are desert dwellers dressed in flowing full-body black garments. Veils cover their faces, leaving only an opening for their eyes. On the right, a team of people is attired entirely in white with only the contours of their bodies visible and reflective shields obscuring their eyes. Those on the left reference residents of the Middle East while the figures on the right are meant to be stand-ins for Americans.[14]

In the early months of 2006, when the artist was working on the animation, the events of September 11 and the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq were still fresh in recent memory. Qiu recalls how these events reverberated worldwide through their geo-political ramifications and facilitated by the immediacy of mass media.[15] It confirmed for him the networks and systems that make contemporary crises shared experiences. This also fed into his continued interest in uncovering the universalized ideals and epistemologies underwriting these global connections. To this end, it's important to recognize his address of the Iraq War as more than a timely reference. This subject matter participated in the artist's study of the history and aftermath of colonialism. Not an isolated event – historically or geo-culturally – the 2003 incursion was only the latest instance of Western occupation in the Middle East. Historian Charles Townshend positions the twenty-first-century invasion in relation to Britain's conquest of Mesopotamia in 1914 and its "imperial expansion on a dizzying scale" following World War I.[16] In the succeeding century, demands over access to oil-rich countries and strategic policies to keep oil prices stable worldwide led to European and American support for regional wars and direct military

14
Qiu, interview, 2015.

15
Qiu Anxiong, interview by author, February 21, 2014.

16
Charles Townshend, *Desert Hell. The British Invasion of Mesopotamia*, Cambridge, MA 2011, xxiii.

[Fig. 4]
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 08:39 © Qiu Anxiong.

intervention in the Middle East. This intertwining of Western corporate interests, militarism, national security, and economic sanctions here illustrates a global hegemonic model of power emerging from a legacy of colonialism.

Within this narrative, Qiu embeds references to techno-optimism that extend and magnify the aforementioned complicity between science and time. In particular, when choosing how to depict Americans, Qiu drew on a particular source: Intel advertisements of people wearing cleanroom suits.[17] Colloquially called "bunny suits", these full-body coverings are part of the rigorous ultra-clean protocols necessary for working with microelectronics. By protecting technology from the oils and dust particles carried on people's bodies, these garments consign the natural world to a form of contamination. The choice of the bunny suit as emblematic of Americans both explicitly pulls in and, indeed, directly results from the linking of technology and geo-politics in the world economy. During the 1990s, the easing of Cold War trade embargoes meant that the U.S.-based tech giant Intel could now sell computers to China. With China as a new "market to be mined", the American chipmaker set out to conquer this frontier by enticing Chinese consumers with dreams of personal computing.[18]

In a characteristic advertisement from the late 1990s for the company's new Pentium chip, a voiceover announces that viewers are being shown "the world's most advanced manufacturing environment", but then disrupts the presumed sterility of these places by showing workers dancing wildly in colorful, metallic bunny suits. As Intel's director of worldwide advertising explained in 1997: "These commercials are humorous, high-tech fantasies that show how fun computing can be with MMX technology."[19] Such high-tech fantasies spread visions of the future built on access to the newest and fastest technology while preying on fears of falling behind. To preserve the upper-hand, it was just as important for Intel to entice Chinese consumers as it was to keep knowledge from potential Chinese competitors. In the 2000s, Intel built testing and assembly plants in Shanghai and Chengdu, taking advantage of low-cost labor.[20] Notably, they did not set up any fabrication facilities – the very ones that require bunny suits – in order to safeguard intellec-

17
Qiu, interview, 2015.

18
Jeffrey Parker, Intel in China to Push Development of Software, in: *Journal of Commerce*, 1994, 5A.

19
Intel, *Intel Launches New Ad Campaign for MMX™ Technology That Puts the Fun in Computing*, January 22, 1997, Intel press release (January 25, 2024).

20
Andrew K. Collier, Labour Cost, Education Attract Intel. Chipmaker Picks Chengdu Site for Assembly and Test Plant, in: *South China Morning Post*, August 28, 2003, 3.

tual property over advanced chip design.[21] To maintain economic dominance meant ensuring the continuation of strict hierarchies that enforced geo-political divisions between those who create and those who assemble, and more broadly, those who produce and those who consume. All of this was powered by a belief in technology as the future, and Western "control and management of knowledge" as the means of maintaining authority in the world order.[22] Qiu's basis of an entire tribe on these "bunny people" enshrines the aspirations for technology within the accumulation of technical knowledge and global capital.

In depicting successive scenes of militarism and environmental destruction, Qiu presents a deep skepticism towards these same future-facing ambitions. Extending from the film's prologue, the heralding of science and technology in the name of progress arrives out of the same logic that organizes the world according to dominators and dominated. As a chilling example of their convergence, the artist states: "the theory of relativity allowed us to better understand the world, but it also led to nuclear weapons".[23] This is aptly depicted in one of the final scenes when a nuclear explosion blooms over a city. This not only concludes a plot strewn with violence and global competition, but also serves as a final reminder to viewers of the promises of scientific progress, represented first by the double helix and then by the mushroom cloud.

III. An Animated World

While featuring antagonistic stand-offs between distinct parties, a key cornerstone of Qiu's vision of the contemporary world – its history and future – lies in his allusions to the universal myths and economic demands that weave together seemingly discrete peoples and territories. As a physical counterpart to these interdependencies, he includes twisting pipelines, meandering roads, and elevated thoroughfares that snake through the animation [Fig. 5]. Without beginning or end, these conduits for circulation form interlocking networks that traffic goods and resources all over the world.

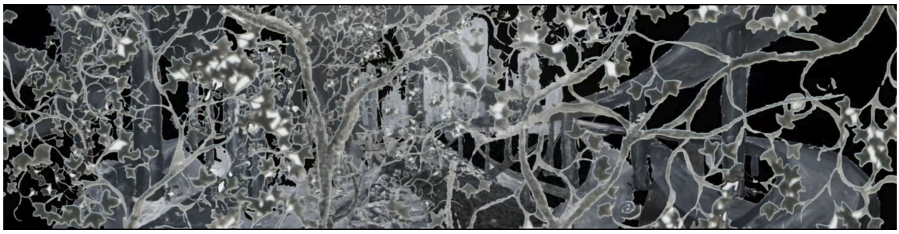
When those same structures morph into sinewy veins, curling vines, and creeping tendrils, Qiu expands the connective tissues of globalization beyond their lateral, physical configurations [Fig. 6]. By activating manmade structures with writhing, rhizomatic growth, the artist morphologically transforms inert forms into living ones. This is most evident when the earth's mantle and

21
U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2005 Report to Congress*, Washington D.C. 2005 (March 8, 2024).

22
Mignolo, The Darker Side, 33.

23
Qiu, interview, 2015.

[Fig. 5]
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 10:05 © Qiu Anxiong.



[Fig. 6]
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 07:50 © Qiu Anxiong.

core appear unmistakably like dermis and flesh [Fig. 7]. A thumping heartbeat plays beneath the scene as scorpion-like creatures insert their stingers to pierce the multiple layers. Viscerally and visually connecting the land with those who occupy it, we see at once a zoomed-out view of the earth's strata down to its core and a zoomed-in view of skin, flesh, and blood vessels. When the creatures begin to bore through the surface, they appear as much like a drill in search of fossil fuels as needles seeking blood or marrow. Recalling Qiu's earlier connections between the physical environment – mountains and seas – and the double helix, he continues here to show the multiple scales and sectors through which colonization, invasion, and extraction occur.

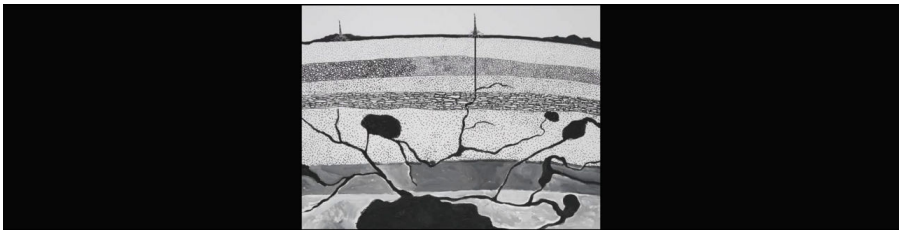
In his mapping and merging of exterior and interior, and macro and micro, Qiu connects the seemingly distinct fields of geology and biology. This is already raised through the theme of oil and war where the drilling of the earth is connected to the spilling of blood. Qiu goes even further with this when he remarks that even though people might consider the war over oil a problem exclusively between the Middle East and the United States, everyone is implicated: "Everything you eat has petroleum."[24] The burning of fossil energy to create food energy inextricably connects oil and industrial food processing.[25] That the very things we ingest deplete the richness of the earth multiple times over links the geological with the biological through increasingly integrated and insatiable chains of consumption. This breaks down the illusion that wars and ecological destruction are restricted to territories or nation-states "over there". Instead, as Qiu contends, they are imprinted into each of us at the corporeal level.

Bringing together geology and biology raises important questions about the impact of perceived distinctions between what qualifies as life and non-life. As Elizabeth A. Povinelli argues: treating coal and petroleum as dead remains makes it easy to subordinate, occupy, exploit, and exhaust. Turning so-called dead fuel into resources for sustaining life allows people to overlook the ethical and ecological costs of extraction.[26] Qiu confronts this when he depicts a living world where even the manmade structures move like organisms. What happens if we start to perceive stones, earth, infrastructure, and soil as living? When the earth is as alive as a human body? When, hearkening back to nineteenth-century defenses against Western aggression, blasting open a mountain is likened

24
Qiu, interview, 2014.

25
Richard Manning, The Oil We Eat. Following the Food Chain Back to Iraq, in: *Harper's Magazine*, February 2004, 37–45, here 44.

26
Elizabeth A. Povinelli connects this to the exploitation of "living fuel" in the form of human labor in *Geontologies. A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Durham, NC 2016, 167. For more on the connection between geology and extractive economies, see also Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Minneapolis 2019.



[Fig. 7]
Qiu Anxiong, Still from New Book of Mountains and Seas, Part I, 2006, Three-channel animated video with sound, 30:05 min., 09:16 © Qiu Anxiong.

to tearing a hole in the belly? These images contribute to the more overt examples of animism in the film, generating an even more pervasive sense that everything around us – from machines to the ground itself – is profoundly alive.[27]

When Qiu presents an animistic world, he is showing viewers what the contemporary world would look like from a different perspective. On the one hand – using a modern scientific lens – the appearance of these creatures may seem like a function of ignorance, evidence of how a primitive person lacks the knowledge of technological machines or scientific understanding to accurately assess what is living. On the other hand, we can focus on what is present in this worldview rather than what is absent. An animistic worldview shows us what was possible to believe before Western modernity dismissed it as backwards. Most notably, it offers a way of relating to the world premised on an "alternative to the modernist elevation of humanity above its natural origins, and by implication, the ecological damage this elevation has wrought".[28]

In championing this alternative, scholars arguing for the productive value of animism have focused on it as a relational epistemology. This places emphasis on the dynamism found in relations rather than an exclusive focus on individuation and dichotomization. Nurit Bird-David makes this explicit comparison:

> If the object of modernist epistemology is a totalizing scheme of separated essences [...] the object of animistic knowledge is understanding relatedness from a related point of view within the shifting horizons of the related viewer.[29]

This attention to animism's insistence on interconnectivity challenges the dualistic ontologies that separate humans and nonhumans, subjects and objects, and upsets the "mechanisms and practices that constitute us as 'autonomous individuals'".[30] As Achille Mbembe notes, animism is predicated on a foundational willingness to see agency as distributed among people, objects, and

27
As Darryl Wilkinson has observed: the "renewed interest in indigenous animism in terms of its place within recent intellectual history" is largely connected to "the growing engagement with the global environmental crisis among scholars in the humanities". Id., Is There Such a Thing as Animism?, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, 2017, 289–311, here 289.

28
Ibid., 295.

29
Nurit Bird-David, Animism Revisited. Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology, in: *Current Anthropology* 40, 1999, 67–79, here 77. See also: Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Exchanging Perspectives. The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies, in: *Common Knowledge* 10, 2004, 463–484; Alberto Lopez Cuenca, Trashing Scale. Distributed Agency, the Afterlife of Commodities and Animism in Contemporary Art, in: *Third Text* 35, 2021, 317–340.

30
Escobar, Pluriversal Politics, 15.

creatures, thus challenging the "monopolistic agency" of humans espoused by Western modernity.[31]

These ideas can also be found in the original classic which similarly proposes a more horizontal relationship between humans and non-humans. In his study of the classic, Richard Strassberg argues that the depicted "monsters" differ from those "in the Ancient Greek or medieval European sense. That is, they are not primordial powers that must be overcome by virtuous gods or heroes for human civilization to progress", and instead "most legitimately dwell in the environment alongside humankind and simply represent another, overlapping order with its own principles".[32] In its challenge to a singular logic of domination and submission, this description suggests a pluriversal acceptance of co-transforming and co-existing orders of being. Indeed, animism reminds us of ways of being that challenge the universality of a "singular reality" wherein "only the reality validated by science is real".[33]

IV. Reaching Back, Looking Ahead

In this paper, I have shown how the plot of *New Book of Mountains and Seas* traces and presents contemporary crises as underwritten by a history of colonialism, and continued through the logic of coloniality. In the very premise of the work, Qiu upsets the distinctions between animate versus inanimate. In doing so, he destabilizes accepted divisions and shows the implications of seeing a world alive. As Arturo Escobar argues: "we urban-moderns imagine the world as an inanimate surface to be *occupied*; for many relational cultures, to the contrary, human beings and other beings *inhabit* a world that is alive."[34] Qiu's film shows both of these: the former being our contemporary trajectory with dystopic projections, the latter a way to imagine new possibilities for operating in the world.

Qiu describes the classic's framing of the relationship among humans, non-humans, and the environment in this way:

> The ancients recognized that the fate of man and the fate of nature were inextricable. This is quite different from the Western ideal of shaping nature to fit human needs. Traditional Chinese culture believed that all life existed in concert with nature. The ancients saw humans, though chief among

31
Achille Mbembe, *Negative Messianism in the Age of Animism*, lecture at the Institute of the Humanities and Global Cultures, September 26, 2017 (January 25, 2024).

32
Strassberg, A Chinese Bestiary, 44.

33
Escobar, Pluriversal Politics, 15.

34
Ibid., 26.

> all animals but essentially the same as other forms of life, comprising but a part of the overall ecology.[35]

In raising this difference, the artist is not calling for a return to precolonial times nor an essentialist restoration of cultural purity. Instead, when placed in a decolonial framework, we can recognize two important functions of this animistic viewpoint. First, it illustrates ways of being that were devalued by the constitution of Western modernity. Second, in using his art to restitute these perspectives, he invites viewers to consider the productive value of previously foreclosed paths.[36] Indeed, the plot of the animation reveals how modern science's authoritative status produced binary categories such as "East-West, primitive-civilized, magic/mythic-scientific, irrational-rational, traditional-modern" that relegated "other" epistemologies and cosmologies to the past while the West represented the future.[37]

In his revival of animism, Qiu not only bucks against the authorization of these binaries, but also uses his roster of creatures to point out the breakdown between the animate and inanimate already underway. His living machines invariably conjure up existing examples of artificial intelligence, collaborative robots, and autonomous vehicles. The fact that they appear as animal-machine hybrids – somewhere between animal-like machines and machine-like animals – already starts the work of destabilizing distinctions. Hybridity accepts the value and importance of "borrowing vital parts of other vital beings".[38] When a single body houses an assemblage of forms and capacities, its constitutive matter is already based on thinking relationally and valuing multiplicity. In this light, animism's insistence on "re-distributed agency" prepares us well for thinking critically about "the shifting distribution of powers between the human and the technological".[39] This follows Mbembe's argument that animism primes us for the technological future and the need to accept "a shared ecology if you want, a shared ecosystem, circulation of life, of vital fluids – organs – between different types of species, and in the process the co-transformation, co-

35
Qiu, New Classic.

36
This follow's Mignolo's formulation of decolonial work as restituting what was destituted by the constitution of Western coloniality.

37
Anibal Quijano, Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America, in: *Nepantla. Views from South* 1, 2000, 533–580, here 533.

38
Mbembe, Negative Messianism.

39
Nils Gilman, How to Develop a Planetary Consciousness, interview with Achille Mbembe, in: *Noema*, January 11, 2022 (February 24, 2024).

evolution, and so forth and so on".[40] A human-centered hierarchy that only sees machines in an instrumentalized way will continue to deny the epistemological changes that need to take place. This final claim for the future is an important reminder for how we see the relevance of animism: not only as a challenge to the complicit relationship between science and time that have historically dismissed it as irrational and traditional, but also the need to break through these ways of thinking to produce new futures.

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40
Achille Mbembe, *Transcript: In Conversation with Achille Mbembe*, University College London, June 17, 2020 (August 15, 2022).

A GROUP DANCE THAT NEVER ENDS

A PLURIVERSAL APPROACH TO *CONTINUUM – GENERATION BY GENERATION* (2017)

Birgit Hopfener

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
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ABSTRACT

How did the exhibition in the Chinese pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale entitled *Continuum – Generation by Generation* (*buxi* 不息) mobilize the concept of *buxi*, which translates literally as "endlessness" or "never ceasing"? What does it mean to conceive of art, the world, and oneself through the lens of *buxi*, as endlessly intrarelated? This paper delves into this question from a multi-pronged perspective. First, it explains the meaning of *buxi* and analyzes how the show engages with aesthetic, epistemological, social and political implications of art and the world conceived through a contemporary perspective on the concept of "endlessness". Second, the paper explores how a reading of the show and the artworks – their adopted aesthetic strategies, media, techniques, and materialities – through the lens of *buxi* complicates the critical and aesthetic framework for contemporary art in the global context. Finally, the paper evaluates the engagement with *buxi* – and the respective alternative processual ontology and temporality of art and world – as a useful mode of decolonizing the discipline of art history, even as it emphasizes the importance of adopting a dynamic pluriversal approach that attends to the transcultural relations that shape and reshape the multiplicity of meanings of art in a global framework, its multiple and entangled critical and aesthetic discourses, and the complexity of power structures, and avoids obscuring significant contexts and experiences.

KEYWORDS

Buxi; Decolonial; Entangled; Impermanence; Intrarelated; Pluriversal; Temporal structure of endlessness (*buxi*); Transcultural.

In 2017, the exhibition in the Chinese pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale entitled *Continuum – Generation by Generation (buxi 不息)* mobilized the concept of *buxi*, which translates literally as "endlessness" or "never ceasing". As the show's curator-cum-artist, Qiu Zhijie, writes, the exhibition's goal was to "capture the *buxi* energy" and "explain the operating mechanism of *buxi* in Chinese art".[1] Aligned with the processual ontological principle of the cosmos *Dao*, *buxi* allows for an understanding of the world as "endless" transformational process.[2] Art, as an intrarelated part of the world, is committed and obliged to understand, articulate, navigate, and mediate *buxi*.

Continuum – Generation by Generation invited visitors to experience art and themselves as participants in an "endless energy field" (不息的能量场 *buxi nengliang chang*) [Fig. 1].[3] The show came "alive" through looped images of swirling, bubbling water around embroidered naturalistic rocks, of large rolling waves, sounds of gurgling water and crashing tides, and through an automated animated shadow theater, with puppets of mythical creatures continuously wandering across three screens. Mounted on walls, placed on the floor, shown in vitrines, and suspended from the ceiling, artworks in various scales, media, materials, colors, and techniques were displayed in ways that emphasized their intrarelations.

Traversing and shifting their gaze between artworks near and far, small and large, dark and bright, high and low, and by zooming in and out to details and the broader picture, visitors could potentially perceive themselves as part of this intrarelated structure, as co-constituting a continuous relational space. Tang Nannan's hyperrealistic sculpture with the title *Morrow Return*[4] (明 还 *ming huan*, 2012 [Fig. 2]) "performed" such visitor-subjects' intertwinement. Easily confused with an actual living visitor, the artwork showed a life-sized young Asian man in contemporary clothing with his torso slightly bent, his arms crossed behind his lower back, engrossing himself in looking at two roundly shaped moving images of the sea. Only by coming closer would exhibition visitors notice that the images of the sea that he was looking at were actually projected from the man's own eyes.

1
Slides provided to the author by Qiu Zhijie.

2
Franklin Perkins, Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy, in: Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition) (February 29, 2024). Roger T. Ames, The Great Commentary (Dazhuan 大傳) and Chinese Natural Cosmology, in: *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 2, 2015, 1–18 (February 29, 2024).

3
Qiu Zhijie: Weinisi yu Zhongguo feiyi de "qiannian zhiyue" | jiangzuo zongshu 邱志杰：威尼斯与中国非遗的"千年之约"|讲座综述 (Qiu Zhijie: "A Millennium Promise" between Venice and Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage) (February 29, 2024).

4
"Morrow" is a poetic expression for "tomorrow".

[Fig. 1]
Installation view, Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th Venice Biennale, Venice, 2017, in: Qiu Zhijie (ed.), *Continuum – Generation by Generation. The 57th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Pavilion China, China Pavilion at the Venice Biennial, May–November 2017* (exh. cat.).

[Fig. 2]
Tang Nannan, Morrow Return (*ming huan*), 2017, Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th International Art Exhibition, Pavilion of China, Ming Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai, March 31, 2017 – June 3, 2018, photo by the author.

What does it mean to conceive of art, the world, and oneself as endlessly intrarelated? This paper delves into this question from a multi-pronged perspective. First, it explains the meaning of *buxi* and analyzes how Qiu Zhijie engages with aesthetic, epistemological, social, and political implications of art and the world conceived through a contemporary perspective on the concept of "endlessness" when conceptualizing the exhibition.

Second, it critiques and provincializes mainstream Euro-American intellectual frameworks and their respective historical and epistemic "truths", through critically engaging with *buxi* – a concept from an alternative thought tradition – including its respective governing effects, when reading the exhibition and its artworks.[5] Conventionally, as art historian Pamela Lee explains in her book *Chronophobia*, contemporary art's relationship to time and temporality since the 1960s conceptual turn in Europe and North America has been universally framed as an attack on modernist self-referential autonomy, modernist medium-specificity, modernist presentness, and the related temporality of containment.[6] While it is not my intention to suggest a reading of the exhibition *Continuum* and its artworks outside this Euro-American modernist-postmodernist narrative and the related critical and aesthetic framework for contemporary art, I argue for the importance of complicating discourses on contemporary art's relationship to time and temporality by broadening the repositories of art, cultural, and intellectual histories. By recuperating the multiplicity of art historical concepts, "which have undergone erasure or flattening due to the diffusion of modern disciplinary taxonomies across the globe",[7] and by attending to the transcultural interactions, which include connections and frictions, that shape and reshape art and concepts, new questions are asked and knowledge of the multiplicity of art is created. It is through analyses of transcultural histories, of how concepts are reconfigured through connections to multiple sources outside *and* inside Euro-America, that fresh insights into the multiplicity of meanings of artistic forms, aesthetic strategies, media, techniques, and materiality are gained. Such analysis also enables the formulation of a pluriversal critical framework – that is a "more plausible theoretical scaffolding for the discipline" that "responds to the challenge of cultural plurality".[8]

5
About the necessity to critically engage with the governing effects of alternative concepts in order to avoid romanticization and essentialist, radical diversity, see: Monica Juneja, *Can Art History Be Made Global? Mediations from the Periphery*, Berlin 2023, and David Graeber's critique of the "ontological turn" in anthropology: David Graeber, Radical Alterity is just Another Way of Saying "Reality". A Reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in: *HAU. Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5/2, 2015, 1–41 (October 4, 2023).

6
Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia. On Time in the Arts of the 1960s*, Cambridge, MA 2004.

7
Juneja, Can Art History Be Made Global?, 34.

8
Ibid., 22.

Finally, the paper evaluates the engagement with *buxi* – and the respective processual ontology and temporality of art and world – as a useful mode of decolonizing the discipline of art history, while emphasizing the importance of adopting a dynamic pluriversal approach. In contrast to traditional universalist or relativist art historical frameworks, a dynamic pluriversal approach attends to the multiplicity *and* transcultural connections that constitute meanings of art in the global world, and the complexity of power structures involved, and avoids obscuring significant contexts and experiences. It is in this regard that the last section of this paper seeks to understand why a show that, on the one hand, was praised as a successful example of global art history was, on the other hand, heavily criticized by colleagues mainly in but also outside of China as nationalist, traditionalist, or un-contemporary.[9] Instead of taking

[9] The show has been criticized as being too close to the official nationalist agenda, as traditionalist and uncontemporary, as provincial, self-referential, and not interested in global issues, as dismissive of individual freedom, and disconnected from contemporary Chinese society. The artists Zhang Peili and Wang Gongxin, among many others in the contemporary Chinese art scene, have been criticizing Qiu Zhijie as being too close to the Communist Party's agenda. Zhang Peili's WeChat Friend Circle Post in response to the exhibition Chong su Zhongguo xinling – Zhongyang meiyuan de sizheng ketang chuang xin 重塑中国心灵—中央美院的思政课堂创新 (Reinventing the Chinese Mind – Innovation in the Civics Classroom of Central Academy of Fine Arts) at Ming Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai, summer 2021. As I will explain in greater detail below, *buxi* has in fact been employed by the Chinese government in the context of its nationalist self-strengthening agenda. Xi Jinping, Jianshe Zhongguo tese Zhongguo fengge Zhongguo qipai de kaoguxue, genghao renshi yuanyuanliuchang bodajingshen de Zhonghua wenming 建设中国特色中国风格中国气派的考古学 更好认识源远流长博大精深的中华文明 (Developing an Archaeology with Chinese Te-Se, Chinese Style and Chinese Characteristics, to Understand the Chinese Civilization Better, Which Has a Long History and Is Profound), in: *Qiushi* 求是 23, 2020 (September 5, 2021). Further articles that have criticized the exhibition *Continuum* as too close to the official, nationalist discourse of tradition include: Ornella de Nigris, *Continuum – Generation by Generation*. The Representation of Chinese Traditions at the China Pavilion of the 57th *Venice Biennale*, in: *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 6/2–3, 2019, 343–366; Jenifer Chao, China's Ancient Past in Its Contemporary Art. On the Politics of Time and Nation Branding at the Venice Biennale, in: *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 6/2–3, 2019, 321–341; Richard Vine, Choose Your China. Three Pavilions in Venice, in: *Art in America*, May 19, 2017 (February 29, 2024). Many have criticized the exhibition's inclusion of folk art as un-contemporary, and some have thought the show was provincial. For example: Liang Xing, "Zhongguoguan" dalunzhan: youli shuoli, bie chaochao "中国馆"大论战：有理说理 别吵吵 (The Great Debate about the "Chinese Pavilion". Be Reasonable. Don't Quarrel), in: *Bei qing yi ping* 北青艺评 (Beijing Youth Art Review), June 17, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Lao Ma, Weishuang Zhongguoguan zheyang de xiaohua haiyao chixu duojiu 威双中国馆这样的笑话还要持续多久 (How Long Will the Joke Like the Chinese Pavilion at Venice Biennale Last), in: *Yishu quan* 艺术圈 (Art Circle), June 7, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Zhang Xiaoling, Neishang: dangdai yishu weihe suxiu? Zhang Xiaoling tan di 57 jie Weinisi Shuangnianzhan 内伤：当代艺术为何速朽？张晓凌谈第 57 届威尼斯双年展 (Internal Injury: Why Does Contemporary Art Decay Rapidly? Zhang Xiaoling on the 57th Venice Biennale), in: *Zhongguo meishu bao* 中国美术报 (Art News of China), June 12, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Chen Xiao, Dong Daozi, Sun Qidong, and Zhang Ying, Yan shuo | Dangdai yishu – wei shangliu jieceng ershe de gao xiaofei huangyan? 盐说|当代艺术—为上流阶层而设的高消费谎言？ (Contemporary Art. A Consumerist Lie for the Upper Class?), in: *Fenghuang yishu* 凤凰艺术 (Phoenix Art), July 26, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Zhu Qi, Zhu Qi: Minzu de bushi shijie de: guanyu Zhongguoguan de "xiongmao guan" hua 朱其|民族的不是世界的：关于中国馆的"熊猫馆"化 (Zhu Qi: What Is National Is Not International: On the "Giant Panda Pavilionization" of the Chinese Pavilion), in: *Qiren zhidao* 其人之道 (The Way of Humans), June 6, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Chen Ming, Chen Ming: Zheshi dangdai yishu ma? Di 57 jie Weinisi Shuangnianzhan "Zhongguoguan" guancha 陈明：这是当代艺术吗？第 57 届威尼斯双年展"中国馆"观察 (Chen Ming: Is This Contemporary Art? Observations on Chinese Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale), in: *Zhongguo meishu bao* 中国美术报 (Art News of China), June 6, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Wen Song, Yishu daoke | Wen Song: Dangdai huanxi yishu he Weinisi zhi yao 艺术刀客｜闻松：当代幻戏艺术和威尼斯之药 (Wen Song: Contemporary Illusionistic Art and the Venetian Medicine), in: *Yishu daoke* 艺术刀客 (Art Swordsman), June 5, 2017 (December 22, 2022). Many people were critical that Qiu Zhijie

sides, a dynamic pluriversal approach not only retains the situatedness of the multiple and transculturally entangled and implicated perspectives that shape and reshape critical discourses and controversies around the exhibition, but seeks to put them in constructive conversations that hold space for reflecting multi-directional implications of individuals[10] and allows for continuously pulling oneself and each other from static positions.[11]

I. Explaining the Concept of *Buxi* and How Qiu Zhijie Mobilizes It

Buxi was first articulated in the *Great Commentary* (大傳 *Dazhuan*), an important part of the composite *Book of Changes* (易经 *Yijing*),[12]

didn't make space for the individual positions and life experiences of the invited artists and instead centered his perspective on Chinese tradition: Zhang Yingchuan, Shalong | Guanyu Weinisi Shuangnianzhan taolun de taolun, zai "yishu wansui" de zhuti homian… 沙龙|关于威尼斯双年展讨论的讨论 在"艺术万岁"的主题后面… (Salon | A Discussion on the Discussion of Venice Biennale, Behind the Theme of "Viva Arte Viva"…), in: 1314 *Sheji yu yishu* 1314 设计与艺术 (1314 Design and Art), October 12, 2017 (December 22, 2022); Route 66, Weinisi Shuangnianzhan guojiaguan de guaiqiao 威尼斯双年展国家馆的乖巧 (The Cleverness of the Chinese Pavilion at Venice Biennale), in: *Douban* 豆瓣 (Beanstalk PRC social networking website), June 15, 2017 (December 22, 2022). Some thought the show was disconnected from contemporary Chinese society: Gu Chengfeng, Huakan | Chuancheng yu dangdaixing de youli – ping di 57 jie Weishuang Zhongguoguan 画刊｜传承与当代性的游离——评第 57 届威双中国馆 (Art Monthly | Inheritance and Dissociation from Contemporaneity – On the Chinese Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale), in: *Huakan* 画刊 (Art Monthly), September 6, 2017 (December 22, 2022). Zheng Shu, Haishi yaoshuo Weinisi Shuangnianzhan de zuguoguan 还是要说威尼斯双年展的祖国馆 (We Still Have to Talk About the Chinese Pavilion at Venice Biennale), in: *Yishu biji* 艺姝笔记 (Art Notes), May 25, 2017 (December 22, 2022). This list of negative reviews of the exhibition *Continuum* was compiled and translated with the help of my research assistants Liu Dandan and Wu Xiaofan. Thank you both.

10 The concept of multi-directionality is informed by Michael Rothberg's multidirectional approach to Holocaust memory in the global context. Rothberg explains that "the term 'multidirectional memory' was coined as a way of conceptualizing what happens when different histories of extreme violence confront each other in the public sphere". He rejects what he calls "competitive memory", an understanding of memory that privileges certain memories and marginalizes others and instead argues that "memory works productively through negotiation, cross-referencing", and that such a relational approach to memory is not "less memory, but more – even of subordinated memory traditions". He writes: "I argue that collective memories of seemingly distinct histories are not easily separable from each other, but emerge dialogically. For example, not only has memory of the Holocaust served as a vehicle through which other histories of suffering have been articulated, but the emergence of Holocaust memory itself was from the start inflected by histories of slavery, colonialism, and decolonization that at first glance might seem to have little to do with it." However, it is crucial to examine if different memories and histories are put into relation out of political responsibility or with the aim to achieve exoneration. A multidirectional approach to difficult memories and histories is not interested in the conventional categories of perpetrator/victim or bystander, arguing that only if we understand and reflect on how each subject "occupies multiple positions [as perpetrator/victim or bystander] of implication in relation to multiple conflict" can the political responsibility to abolish injustices and forge solidarities with victims arise. Michael Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory. Testimony between History and Memory, in: *Auschwitz Foundation International Quarterly* 119, 2014 (January 17, 2024); Katie Lawrence, *The Implicated Subject. Dr. Michael Rothberg on Multidirectional Political Responsibility*, March 25, 2021 (January 17, 2024); Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford, CA 2009; Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Stanford, CA 2019.

11 Tim Ingold, Toward a New Humanism. One World Anthropology, in: *HAU. Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8/1–2, 2018, 158–172, here 160.

12 The composite text of three parts that we conceive as the *Yijing* today was compiled in 125 BCE, during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) when it was canonized as one of the

the foundational cosmological text for Confucian and Daoist Philosophies of Change.[13] The *Book of Changes* contains the eight trigrams and sixty-four hexagrams – graphic combinations of three and respectively six solid and broken lines stacked upon each other in various combinations – that were used as oracles, and various comments and interpretations of these. The *Great Commentary* (大傳 *Dazhuan*), also called the *Commentary on the Appended Phrases* (繫辭 *Xi Ci*) is considered one of the most important commentaries of the third part of the *Yijing*, the commentaries called *Ten Wings* (十翼 *Shi Yi*), which were added in 300 BCE during the Warren States period (475–221 BCE). Through the addition of the *Ten Wings* and particularly the *Great Commentary* the status of the *Yijing* changed. It was now conceived as a cosmological text with the trigrams and hexagrams understood not as oracles anymore, but as symbols of "cosmic patterns, that visualize and mediate relations between humanity and nature, and the complexity of human life".[14]

Viewed through the lens of *buxi*, the world is understood as a transformational event, generated continuously in autopoetic processes of "self-so-ing" (自然 *ziran*). Originating from *Dao* (道), the transcendent and immanent principle of effect and creation – often translated as "the Way" – the world unfolds through continuous processes of division and differentiation. Initially, the two complementary aspects *Yin* and *Yang* come into being by the first divisional action of the ontological principle *Dao* followed by continuous processes of reciprocal interpenetration, through which *Yin* and *Yang* endlessly multiply, generating the "ten thousand things" (万物 *wan wu*) that constitute the world. *Yin*, the feminine and passively receiving principle, and *Yang*, the masculine and active principle, are the two complementary poles of the circulating life "breath" *Qi*. *Qi* is the transcendental and immanent cosmological energetic life force which generates itself as an expression of the continuous

five Confucian classics. The oldest part of the *Yijing* is the *Zhou Yi*, which was originally used for divination during the time of the Western Zhou (1000–750 BCE). The second part comprises statements about the hexagrams written by King Wen and the Duke of Zhou during the eleventh century BCE and the third part is a body of commentaries called *Ten Wings* (十翼 *shi yi*) which were traditionally assumed to have been written by Confucius, an attribution that has later been contested. Hon Tze-Ki, Chinese Philosophy of Change (Yijing), in: Zalta and Nodelman, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (March 9, 2024); Eliot Weinberger, What Is the I Ching?, in: *China File*, February 25, 2016 (February 29, 2024).

13
According to Geir Sigurdsson the *Book of Changes* is the cosmological foundation of conceiving and visualizing reality as a process of continuous change in both dominant traditional Chinese worldviews, namely Daoism as well as in Confucianism. Geir Sigurdsson, *Confucian Propriety and Ritual Learning. A Philosophical Interpretation*, Albany, NY 2015, 36. Roger Ames stresses the significance of the *Yijing* for Chinese intellectual history and culture: "As important as the Daoist and Confucian canons have been in the articulation of Chinese intellectual history and as much as they can be appealed as textual evidence for claims about early Chinese cosmology, perhaps no single text can compete with the *Yijing* 易經 or *Book of Changes* in terms of the sustained interest it has garnered from succeeding generations of China's literati, and the influence it has had on Chinese self-understanding. The *Yijing* has been and still remains, in every sense, the first among the Chinese classics. Indeed, it is this open-ended classic with its centuries of accruing commentaries that has set the terms of art for Chinese cosmology." Ames, The Great Commentary, 1.

14
Hon Tze-Ki, Chinese Philosophy of Change (Yijing).

transformational processes of the world and life. Sinologist Irene Eber summarizes the "basic assumption of the *Yijing*" as follows:

> Everything is in a constant state of change where absolutisms do not exist. Change occurs as the constant and continuous alternation between *yin* and *yang*, the two basic aspects of existence. Equivalence of these two, or their equitable harmony, is never reached because when approaching such a state, the process is reversed and begins anew. The end of the process of change is, therefore, not the resolution of contradictions, a synthesis as it were, but its continuation and assumption of new forms.[15]

With this understanding, "ten thousand things" means that everything that constitutes the world exists only in temporary states of cosmic, self-referential divisional and transformational processes, with their origin in *Dao*. The historian Tze-Ki Hon has called the totality of this endless transformational process "a group dance that never stops".[16]

In his exhibition, Qiu Zhijie introduces the concept of *buxi* as the temporal qualifier of the operating mechanism of the ontological principle of the cosmos *Dao* by explicitly quoting from the Great Commentary part of the Book of Changes: "Generating, generating, never ceasing" (生生之谓易 *sheng sheng zhi wei yi*).[17] In a world operated by *buxi*, everything is constantly changing and impermanent. Impermanence is, in fact, life. In this regard, "the acceptance of human finitude has been identified as the starting point of *Yijing* Philosophy, Philosophy of Change respectively",[18] and the *Book of Changes* has been conceived as a method to engage with the world as ever-changing, which allows us to cope with impermanence and death.

Even though typically framed as a philosophical approach to mitigating anxieties around death and transience, the *Book of*

15
Irene Eber, Foreword, in: Robert Elliott Allinson, *The Philosophical Influences of Mao Zedong. Notations, Reflections and Insights*, London 2020, xiii.

16
Hon Tze-Ki, Chinese Philosophy of Change (Yijing).

17
This translation is by Perkins, Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy. On the label in the exhibition the phrase was translated into English as: "Life and growth: This is the meaning of transformation and change". Richard John Lynn, scholar of Chinese thought, offers a translation that makes it even clearer that *buxi* "endlessness" is the qualifier of the operating mechanism (*sheng sheng*: generating, generating) of the ontological principle of the cosmos *Dao*. Connecting (生生之谓易 *sheng sheng zhi wei yi*) to the previous sentence 日新之謂盛德 (*ri xin zhi we sheng de*), he translates: "It is because the Dao brings renewal day after day that we refer to it here as "replete virtue" 日新之謂盛德. In its capacity to produce and reproduce we call it "change" 生生之謂易." Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes. A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, New York 1994.

18
Hon Tze-Ki, Chinese Philosophy of Change (Yijing).

Changes was first conceptualized in response to political turmoil during the period of the Western Zhou (1000–750 BCE).[19]

The sixty-four hexagrams that make up the *Book of Changes* do not represent the outside world, but are rather traces of the endless process of change, of which the hexagrams are an intrarelated part. Following the logic of the interpenetrating processes of *Yin* and *Yang*, the hexagram groupings of broken and unbroken lines are understood as temporary states and constellations of a world conceived as and by "endless" process. The *Book of Changes* provides instructions on how to read these figures as a way to gain insights into the structures of continuous change and to actively navigate and alleviate these processes of endless change and impermanence.[20]

The second quote from the *Great Commentary* of the *Yijing* cited by Qiu Zhijie speaks about the relationship between human beings and Heaven, nature, and the cosmological processes, and how one constitutes one's self as an "exemplary man" (*junzi*) by successfully immersing oneself in the processes that endlessly generate the world. It states: "The movement of the Heavens is constant and full of power thus the enlightened one [君子 *junzi*, in the Confucian sense, a man of virtue who pursues *Dao*, an exemplary person, who seeks to understand the processes][21] strengthens and exerts himself ceaselessly and tirelessly" (天行健，君子以自强不息 *Tian xing jian, junzi yi ziqiang bu xi*).[22] In other words, human beings and Heaven are in a responsive intrarelation with one another, and human beings who relentlessly pursue *Dao* through self-cultivation practices, such as art, become enlightened *junzi*. In a world governed by change and intrarelatedness, what power structures between human beings and nature/cosmological processes, what understanding of human agency does this quote from the *Yijing*

19
About the unstable socio-political context in which the *Yijing* was first conceptualized see: ibid.

20
Ibid.

21
Jason Htet LinThu and Jason M. Campell, *Junzi* or the Exemplary Man. An Introduction to the Confucian Gentleman, an essay compiled from the notes for a short lecture presented to the Esoteika Lodge No. 227 of Oregon on February 18, 2015 (March 9, 2024).

22
Qiu Zhijie, Continuum – Generation by Generation, in: id. (ed.), *Continuum – Generation by Generation. The 57th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Pavilion China, China Pavilion at the Venice Biennial, May–November 2017* (exh. cat. accessed in the exhibitions in Shanghai and Beijing), 15–21, here 15. Others have translated the commentary as "Heaven, in its motion, (gives the idea of) strength. The superior man, in accordance with this, nerves himself to ceaseless activity." James Legge, 乾–Qian (July 29, 2020) or "Heaven moves persistently. A *junzi* uses originating strength not to pause." Rudolf Ritsema and Shantena Augusto Sabbadini, *The Original I Ching Oracle or The Book of Changes. The Eranos I Ching Project*, London 2005, eBook, n.p. Ames offers a contextualization of the quote: "The Yijing defines sagacity as the effective integration of the human experience into the operations of nature: The heavens and the earth are in flux and undergo transformation, and the sagely imitate these processes." Ames, The Great Commentary, 8.

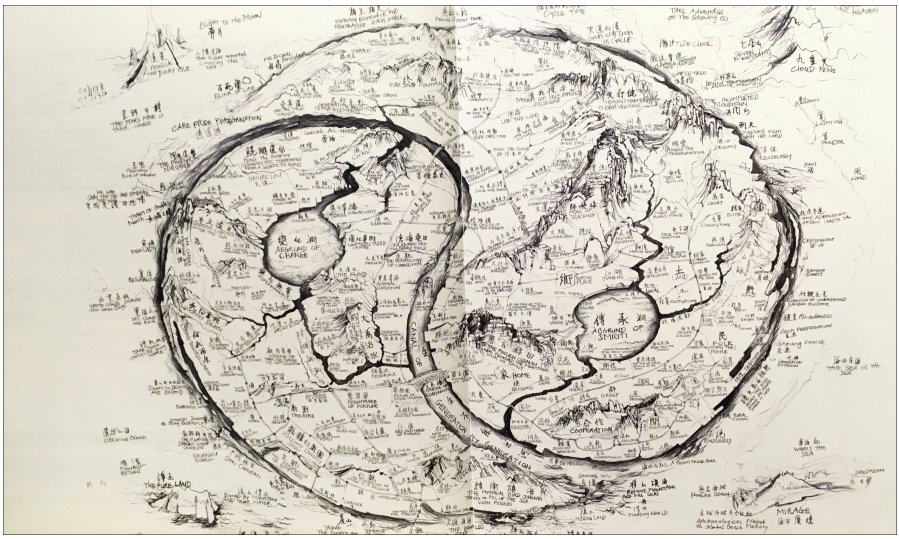
imply?[23] The abovementioned sculpture *Morrow Return* by Tang Nannan can be understood as contemplating this question. The figure observes with seeming interest the images of moving waves that are projected from his own eyes. Yet his posture does not suggest a submissive and integrating attitude but rather a distanced and reflective stance.

Qiu Zhijie's hand-drawn *Map of Buxi* [Fig. 3], which was displayed in the exhibition and discussed in his catalog essay, "provides insights into how 'endlessness' operates in and governs the world".[24] The map takes the shape of the *Yin Yang* symbol, also called the *Taiji* diagram (太极图 *taiji tu*). *Taiji*, the "Great Ultimate", presents the origin and principle of the cosmos, the complementary poles, *Yin* and *Yang*, whose "endless" (*buxi*) interaction constitutes everything that exists.

Qiu Zhijie adopts Chinese literati painting conventions in the *Yin and Yang* structured "map" landscape. Viewers encounter mountains, rivers, ponds (called abysses), land, pathways, bridges, and islands named with terms and concepts of, and references to *buxi*, that appear mainly in Chinese with English translations written below. Despite its name, *Map of Buxi* is not a typical, static image that provides information in a representational fashion. It rather comes to life through its vibrating structural lines, the employment of dynamic calligraphic brushstrokes, abbreviations, and the decision to not close the *Yin* and *Yang* shape. On the left, around the "Abgrund [German for 'abyss', a reference to philosopher Martin Heidegger] of Change", philosophies and mythological stories of change are featured; on the right, around the "Abgrund of Succession" – also called the "Abgrund of Smriti [Sanskrit for 'recollection']" – the map focuses on politics, including political mechanisms of *buxi* in China spanning from the elite to the common people. The left side refers mainly to Buddhism and Daoism, while Confucian references dominate the right side of the diagram. "Being towards death" (向无而在 *xiang wu er zai*), which is written on the left side, south-west of the "Abgrund of Change", signifies the impermanence of human beings, like all else, as participants in the endless continuum of change, intrarelated through *Dao*. The inclusion of philosophical and religious terms in other languages such as

23
While Ames stresses integration, the meaning of the quote has changed through history and in different political contexts. For example, during the May 4th modernization movement of 1918 the intellectual and author Guo Moruo (1892–1978) interpreted it as combining "both individualism and humanism", because it "sings loudly of the independent spirit and the disciplined personality". Accordingly, it can help one to "purify oneself, enrich oneself, and express oneself", thereby reaching the point of "taking the world as one's duty and sacrificing oneself to save people all around the world". However, Guo explained such a grand sense of social responsibility as an expansion of self, which is tantamount to another, bigger form of self: "to reach the infinite point of one's capacity and wisdom, making it comparable with the greatness of heaven and earth, and even not yield into God". Jianmei Liu, *Zhuangzi and Modern Chinese Literature*, New York 2015, 23.

24
Label of the map in the exhibition and Qiu Zhijie, Who Still Remembers the Untrammeled Journey? Annotation of the Map of *Buxi*, in: id., Continuum – Generation by Generation, 33–38.



[Fig. 3]
Qiu Zhijie, Map of Buxi (*buxi tu*), 2017, Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th International Art Exhibition, Pavilion of China, Ming Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai, March 31, 2017 – June 3, 2018, photo provided by Qiu Zhijie.

German and Sanskrit can be read as an invitation to compare *buxi* with these concepts.

A world intrarelated through *Dao* and operated by impermanence is radically relational. As the scholar of Chinese philosophy Roger T. Ames argues, a substance ontology of discrete things and selves, each of them having its own independent identity and integrity, as understood in classical Greek philosophy, would not only contradict but potentially put the continuum of the world conceptualized as endless transformation process at risk.[25]

It is in this regard that the self, knowledge, and art are conceived as relational and processual, as being shaped and re-shaped in intrarelation with the world and its cosmological and social processes. The map entry "each person is a field of selves" refers to the Confucian understanding of the self as constituted through various social relationships. Knowledge in this regard does not mean to uncover an assumed unchanging truth behind appearances, but to know how meaning is constituted relationally and contextually. Ames explains: "The beginning of Chinese cosmology is not knowledge" (知识 *zhishi*), it's "knowing the way" (知道 *zhi dao*).[26]

In a world conceptualized as intrarelational structure, a split between reality and appearance, and therefore between the world and art, does not exist. If art is not about representing or constructing an outside world, but rather about enacting and mediating the cosmological and social structures that shape and reshape the world, then literati art articulates this "endless" temporality of art through open and relational forms, modular compositions, dynamic brushstrokes, and abbreviations. Qiu Zhijie opposes the temporalities of "endlessness" (不息 *buxi*) with those of "immortality" (不朽 *buxiu*), arguing that Chinese art is not interested in preservation and mummification, but rather in enabling and guaranteeing. "In the long history of the Chinese tradition", he explains, "it is not the pursuit of cultural immortality that has inspired our artists and thinkers, but rather the pursuit of the ceaseless endeavor (求不息) and the generative resilience produced by that endeavor which is implicit in the concept of *buxi*."[27]

Sinologist and poet Pierre Ryckmans, alias Simon Leys (1935–2014), memorably summarized this idea, writing that, "Permanence does not negate change, it informs change. Continuity is not ensured

25
Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Dao De Jing. A Philosophical Translation*, New York 2003, 15, 21, 16. About Ames' understanding of *Dao* as processual and dynamic see also: Jing Liu, The Temporality of Dao. Permanence and Transience, in: Ian Sullivan and Joshua Mason, *One Corner of the Square. Essays on the Philosophy of Roger T. Ames*, Honolulu 2021, 267–273; Roger T. Ames, 'Zoetology'. A New Name for an Old Way of Thinking, in: *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 93, 2023, 81–98 (March 10, 2024).

26
Appreciating the Chinese Difference. An interview with Roger T. Ames, November 12, 2019 (March 10, 2024).

27
Qiu Zhijie, *Continuum – Generation by Generation* (exh. cat., shorter version provided to the author as a pdf by Qiu Zhijie), 3.

by the immobility of inanimate objects, it is achieved through the fluidity of successive generations."[28] According to Qiu, art through the lens of *buxi* "is an ongoing, tireless project of connectivity",[29] rooted in what he calls "relay baton thinking".[30] "Relay baton thinking" is a central aspect of the traditional Chinese concept of art as self-cultivation,[31] according to which literati artists ensured the continuum of oneself and the world through various methods of transmitting and intrarelating past, present, and future, such as copying old masters, and citing, commenting on, and annotating works by other artists.[32]

Qiu understands art as "an ongoing, tireless project of connectivity", which resonates with his long-term project of re-conceptualizing traditional ideas of art as self-cultivation, called "Total Art" (总体艺术 *zongti yishu*) and "Guantong art" (贯通 *guantong yishu*). *Guantong*, literally translated, means "the thread that runs through everything" and revisits the traditional Chinese concept of "comprehensive understanding".[33]

What can be understood as answering to the question about power structures and human agency in a world governed by change and intrarelatedness, Qiu Zhijie reconceptualizes the concept of

28
Pierre Ryckmans, alias Simon Leys, The Chinese Attitude towards the Past, in: *China Heritage Quarterly* 14, June 2008 (February 29, 2024).

29
Qiu Zhijie, Continuum – Generation by Generation, in: id., Continuum – Generation by Generation (exh. cat., shorter version).

30
Ibid.

31
Concepts of self-cultivation play an important role in Daoism, Buddhism, and most prominently in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. On the topic of self-cultivation see, for example: Marcus Schmücker and Fabian Heubel (eds.), *Dimensionen der Selbstkultivierung. Beiträge des Forums für Asiatische Philosophie*, Freiburg i. Br. 2013. With respect to Chinese art, Tu Wei-ming has referred to Xu Fuguan who has stated that "Confucians and Taoists share the belief that self-cultivation is basic to artistic creativity". Tu Wei-ming, The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought. An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics, in: Susan Bush and Christian Murck (eds.), *Theories of the Arts in China*, Princeton, NJ 1983, 57. Jean François Billeter has written about calligraphy as a mode of self-cultivation. Jean François Billeter, *The Chinese Art of Writing*, New York 1990.

32
See, for example, Martin J. Powers, The Temporal Logic of Citation in Chinese Painting, in: *Art History* 37/4, September 2014, 744–763.

33
About Qiu Zhijie's concept of "*guantong* art" see Birgit Hopfener, Tomorrow Things Will Be Different. Qiu Zhijie's Concept of Keeping Alive through Art, in: *Journal for Cultural Research* 21/1, 2017 (special issue "Art, Society and Contemporary China", ed. by Paul Gladston), 10–11. *Guantong*, "comprehensive understanding", has been a central term in Chinese cultural histories of learning and apprehending the world. Antonio S. Cua, scholar of Chinese and comparative philosophy, explains: "The thread that runs through things, [...] intimates the idea that understanding consists in having an insight into the interconnection of all things." It is in this regard that *guantong* does not in the first place mean understanding a specific content, but instead achieving insights into interconnections. Antonio S. Cua, *Human Nature, Ritual, and History. Studies in Xunzi and Chinese Philosophy*, Washington DC 2005, 164. "Total Art" appropriates the *guaontong*-premises of interconnectedness and comprehensive understanding, but turns *guantong*'s traditional unifying and integrative function into a critical one.

self-cultivation from a transcultural perspective drawing on various and entangled concepts and histories of "Total Art".[34]

In contrast to traditional concepts of self-cultivation, that privileged integrating and unifying practices to ensure the continuity of the world, reality, history, and the self in line with specific metaphysical and moral premises and order, Qiu Zhijie, informed by poststructuralism, conceptualizes self-cultivation as a critical practice. Taking the temporal structure of endlessness as the starting point that nothing is fixed and therefore can potentially be deconstructed, and based on "Total Art"'s ultimate aims of "freedom" and "emancipation",[35] self-cultivation must now be committed to continuous world opening not through affirmation but through critical analyses of historical, epistemological, and social (power) structures.[36]

In his elaboration of "relay baton thinking", Qiu Zhijie refers to "Literati Gatherings" (*Yaji*), an inter-generational format of art creation and reception in which

> [...] artists often cooperated, one would draw a stone, one would draw a flower, one would replenish grass leaves, and one would write a poem, and then the person who was good at calligraphy wrote this poem on the paper, many works were finished in this way. The artists were also engaged in the game of mutual exchange reaction and making a response, one would write a poem, and another used his rhyme to write a new poem, the game would never stop until the last person failed to answer it. In this game one would consider someone else's creation as a chance, and it is a way to run the endless flow of energy.[37]

Or, as he writes further,

34
See my detailed transcultural analysis of Qiu Zhijie's concept and map of "Total Art". Birgit Hopfener, Mapping Art History, Relational and Ongoing, in: Qiu Zhijie, *Geography of Knowledge. Maps 2010–2019*, Milan 2020, 42–53.

35
According to the agenda of "Total Art" 'freedom' is not given but has to be acquired. It is by critically intervening in social and historical structures, structures of knowledge and regimes of truth that one achieves freedom. Johnson Chang, An Archaeological Position on the Future, in: *A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge*, Singapore 2008, 23.

36
Hopfener, Tomorrow Things Will Be Different, 4–15; ead., Intervention Is the Answer but What Are the Questions? Developing Criteria for a Critical Examination of Qiu Zhijie's Interventionist Project *A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge*, in: Pauline Bachmann, Melanie Klein, Tomoko Mamine, and Georg Vasold (eds.), *Art/Histories in Transcultural Dynamics. Narratives, Concepts, and Practices at Work, 20th and 21st Centuries*, Paderborn 2017, 229–246. Birgit Hopfener, Between Participatory Engagement and Disciplinary Coercion. A Critique of Calligraphy as a Practice of Performative Meaning Production, in: Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch and Wibke Schrape (eds.), *Moving Signs and Shifting Discourses. Text and Image Relations in East Asian Art*, Weimar (in preparation).

37
Qiu Zhijie Talked About the China Pavilion in Venice Biennale, April 22, 2017 (February 29, 2024).

> In the cliff inscriptions at Mount Tai or along the banks of West Lake, generations of poets have felt and expressed a sense of connectivity with poets of both the past and the future. In this sense, Chinese art is a communal act across five thousand years of our collective history, in which each artist both participates and responds: a kind of cross-generational *yaji* gathering.[38]

Qiu has also used *Yaji*[39] as a way to critique the modern museum and to reconceptualize contemporary art exhibitions beyond the decontextualized white cube approach, as dynamic sites that involve visitors intellectually and bodily as intrarelated participants in continuous world-making processes. His close colleagues, the art historians Johnson Chang and Gao Shiming, have made similar suggestions. They stress *Yaji*'s "tactile, immersive experience" in contrast to "the emphasis of the modern museum on passive visuality",[40] explaining that in contrast to the museums' "emphasis on its function as an edifice of material display", *Yaji* focuses on the gathering aspect, that means "the dynamics generated by the participants and not only on the art being displayed".[41] Qiu, Chang, and Gao mobilize *Yaji* in order to critique "the modern museum, which hastens to historicize (or museum-ize) artworks" and to instead understand art as "living projects", as the literati did.[42] According to Chang and Gao, literati art's "incorporation of fresh critical responses into old artworks demonstrates an implicit resistance against museumization. With each fresh colophon the artwork's story continues, pending commentary from the next deserving connoisseur."[43] Qiu, Chang, and Gao seem primarily interested in re-conceptualizing criticality as an endless and collaborative process of conversations in which artworks function as open processes, articulations, and evidence of and invitations for exchange despite differences. As Qiu Zhijie writes: "*Yaji* gathers people with common interests and

38
Qiu Zhijie, Continuum – Generation by Generation, in: ibid., Continuum – Generation by Generation (exh. cat., shorter version), 11.

39
In his curatorial concept, Qiu Zhijie refers to "Literati gathering" (雅集 *yaji*) in combination with two additional concepts of Chinese art and culture presentation – the "theatre" (剧场 *juchang*), and the "temple fair" (庙会 *miaohui*) – that are all related to art and culture conceived as an open process, as being continuously made and remade in collaborative social events. Qiu Zhijie, "I Am Grateful to My Critics", in: id., Continuum – Generation by Generation, 340–352.

40
Tsong-Zung [Chang Johnson Chang] and Gao Shiming, Yaji Garden. Art under the Sky, in: Suzanne MacLeod, Tricia Austin, Jonathan Hale, and Oscar Ho Hing-Kay (eds.), *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design. Purpose, Process, Perception*, London 2018, 259–276, here 262.

41
Ibid., 261.

42
Ibid.

43
Ibid., 265.

missions, creating a kind of intertextual work. People are aware of their differences and build common ground. Through continuous reciprocal annotation and communication, creation is the result of mutual inspiration."[44]

In contrast to traditional *Yaji* gatherings that were exclusive, private meetings, accessible only to the initiated, the intellectual and political elite of traditional China, the exhibition *Continuum* was conceptualized as a public space open to a heterogenous audience.

While participants in premodern "Literati gatherings" engaged with each other's differences on the basis of shared worldviews, *Continuum* seems to explore how *Yaji*'s temporal structure of "endlessness" potentially allows for plural, even controversial perspectives and engagement in constructive contestations. Like an "endless banquet, which constantly welcomes late-comers" to share food for thought, the exhibition did not end in Venice but was continued with two additional iterations in Beijing and Shanghai in 2019.[45] By including a variety of negative and positive reviews of the Venice show, the Shanghai edition made frictions in the perception of the show explicitly visible. Newspaper and journal clippings pasted on walls and video-taped interviews displayed on screens provided insights into the conflicts, controversies, and discourses around the exhibition, inviting visitors to take their stance and participate in the discussion and potentially contribute to writing the history of the exhibition [Fig. 4].[46]

II. Complicating Discourses on Contemporary Art's Relationship to History, Time and Temporality by Reading the Artworks in the Exhibition *Continuum* through the Lens of *Buxi*

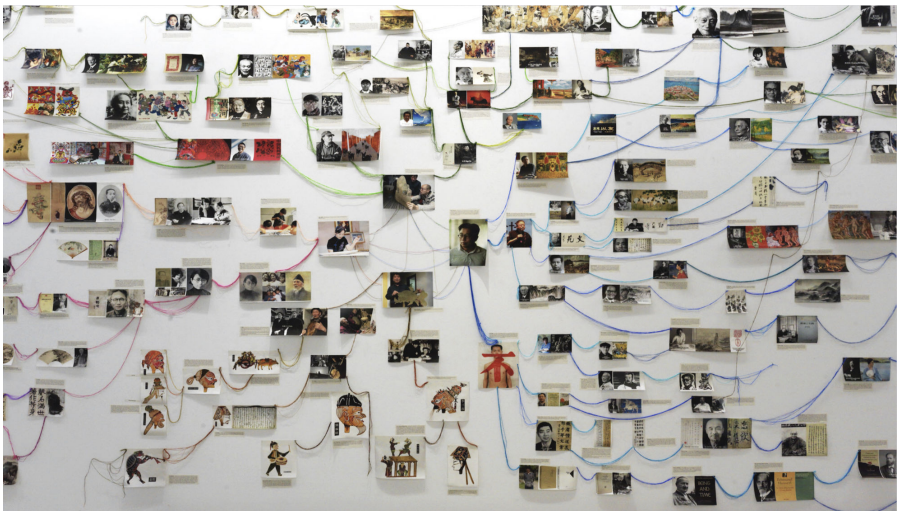
Qiu Zhijie's "Map of Succession of Teachings" (*shicheng tu*) [Fig. 5] is rooted in an understanding of history writing as an "endless", collaborative approach. The artistic historiographic mapping shows an interconnected, transcultural network of artworks, artists, and thinkers that have directly and indirectly shaped the artistic selves of the artists participating in the show, namely: the contemporary artists Tang Nannan, Wu Jian'an, and Qiu Zhijie, and the folk artists Yao Huifen and Wang Tianwen. Interconnected agents and aspects of social, intellectual, and art histories, and providing insights into the inter-generational, collaborative, and transcultural contacts and exchanges that constitute the artists and the exhibition can be read

44
Qiu Zhijie, Who Still Remembers the Untrammeled Journey, 33–38. In his curatorial concept, Qiu Zhijie refers to "Literati gathering" (雅集 *yaji*) in combination with two additional concepts of Chinese art and culture presentation.

45
Shanghai Ming Contemporary Art Museum, March 31–June 3, 2018, Beijing Times Art Museum, March 31–June 17, 2018.

46
Some of the clippings are also published in the catalog: Qiu Zhijie, Continuum – Generation by Generation, in: id., Continuum – Generation by Generation.

[Fig. 4]
Installation view, news clippings of criticisms of the show, Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th International Art Exhibition, Pavilion of China, Ming Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai, March 31, 2017 – June 3, 2018, photo by the author.



[Fig. 5]
Qiu Zhijie, Map of Successions of Teachings (*shicheng tu*), Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th Venice Biennale, Venice, 2017, photo provided by Qiu Zhijie.

as a critical engagement with a longer Chinese tradition of historiographical art rooted in the temporal concept of "endlessness" and its governing effects.[47] Artists referred to older masters and styles, committing to their duty to "endlessly" continue history and to constitute themselves as part of it. Keeping in mind that the literati artist class, because their members served at the court as scholar officials, were the intellectual, social, and political elite in China, their historiographic art practice had wide reaching political implications. It was not just about writing history but about the "endless" continuation of the world according to certain social, political, cosmological, aesthetic, and moral conventions that everyone was expected to abide by.[48]

In contrast, Qiu Zhijie's map makes use of the open temporal structure of *buxi* as a way to emphasize and shed light on the temporary nature of narratives as constructed, and as a mode of deconstructing and reconstructing relations of conventionally separated, even divergent fields and agents.[49] Moreover, the contemporary mobilization of *buxi* can be understood as a mode of critiquing (Western) historicist historiography and the related teleological concept of time. I argue that Qiu's map challenges the conventional Western model of a temporally and spatially bounded art history. Interconnecting histories and philosophies of different national and cultural traditions, contemporary art and folk art, aspects that mainstream histories would not consider together, the map offers a model of how to re-write art history as an open transcultural narrative.[50] Qiu Zhijie writes in this regard: "At the same time, the art of

47
In literati art in China, history writing was a constitutive element in its production and reception, particularly in the context of the Confucian understanding of literati art as self-cultivation. See: Billeter, The Chinese Art of Writing. Creating art by engaging in intra-generational conversations, literati artists had a pronounced historical consciousness and acted as historiographers. I have written in greater detail on Qiu Zhijie's critical engagement with a Chinese concept of historiographic art here: Birgit Hopfener, Qiu Zhijie as Historian. Media Critique as a Mode of Critical Historical Research, in: *World Art* 5/1, 2015 (special issue "Negotiating Histories", ed. by Yuko Kikuchi), 39–61 (March 10, 2024).

48
History and historiography play a central role in China: "To engage with the Chinese people and their culture is to engage with their history. Their history constitutes their ambiance – the very existence of China. The people, politics and culture in China reside in its history. China is the place where we clearly see that the human being is thoroughly homo historiens. By this I mean that the Chinese people are both shaping and being shaped by history." Chun-chieh Huang, *Humanism in East Asian Confucian Contexts*, Bielefeld 2010, 125.

49
I have written about Qiu Zhijie's interest in deconstruction in more detail here: Birgit Hopfener, Qiu Zhijie's Self-Conception as an Artist – Doing Art in a Critical Historical and Transcultural Perspective, in: *Journal of Art Historiography* 10, 2014 (special issue "Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art. Historiographic Reflections", ed. by Wenny Teo) (February 29, 2024).

50
For a more detailed analysis of Qiu Zhijie's interest in mapping as a mode of transcultural history writing, see: Birgit Hopfener, Qiu Zhijie's Map of Total Art. Mapping as a Practice of Transcultural Intervention, in: Annegret Bergmann, Shao-Lan Hertel, Juliane Noth, Antje Papist-Matsuo, and Wibke Schrape (eds.), *Elegante Zusammenkunft im Gelehrtengarten. Studien zur Ostasiatischen Kunst zu Ehren von Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch* (Elegant Gathering in a Scholar's Garden. Studies in East Asian Art in Honor of Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch), Weimar 2015, 300–304; Hopfener, Mapping Art History.

one country is described as a response to the art of other countries. It is not presented as a unique and triumphant tradition of one nation, but as the interweaving and merging of several traditions."[51]

He also explains that the map is a critique of the modern Western myth of the individual artist as the origin of art and creativity:

> But people may have so deeply indulged in the myth of personal creation since Romanticism that they have forgotten the operation of this vast energy [*buxi*]. [...] As long as they are working, their teachers are not dead. They talk about collaboration: Each individual's work reflects the creativity of the collaborator in its vicinity. Such a dismantling of the myth of the artist's individual creation, is an expression of humility. Here, the artist is not portrayed as a God-like figure who opens the heavens and the earth, but as a humble participant in these collaborative energies and inherited powers.[52]

At the core of the exhibition *Continuum*, in which all of the exhibiting artists were included, was the collaborative multi-media installation *Continuum – Removing the Mountains and Filling the Sea* [Fig. 6], which was initially performed, "live", together with musicians and puppet theater performers from Shanxi province, and later "kept alive" through digital and mechanical animations. The coming alive of images through digital and mechanical animation, live puppet show, and the visitors can be read as a contemporary translation of how traditional art was expected to articulate and mediate the world's "lively status of impermanence".[53]

The script of the performance, collaboratively written by Qiu Zhijie and Tang Nannan, takes three Chinese mythological stories of change, "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains", "Jingwei Filling the Sea", and "Fish Kun Morphs into Bird Peng" as its starting point to tell a new story of transformation. Each screen told one of these three stories, but, as Qiu Zhijie writes: "the imagery is interconnected. Bird Jingwei enters the scene of the Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountain, and helps to move the mountains."[54] In both its live and automated versions, puppets only become visible through the interaction between light and dark, or between

51
Qiu Zhijie, Qiu Zhijie: ruhe zuo yige quanqiuhua shidai de guojiaguan 邱志杰：如何做一个全球化时代的国家馆 (Qiu Zhijie: How to Create a National Pavilion in an Era of Globalization), in: *Qiu Zhijie gongzuoshi* 邱志杰工作室 (Qiu Zhijie Studio), June 7, 2017 (December 23, 2022).

52
Ibid.; Qiu Zhijie, Continuum – Generation by Generation, in: id., Continuum – Generation by Generation, 19.

53
Shen Qibin and Qiu Zhijie, Mutual Benefit and Connection. Conversation between Shen Qibin and Qiu Zhijie, in: Shen Qibin (ed.), *Qiu Zhijie. Text-ure*, Hangzhou 2013, 22–33.

54
Ibid.

[Fig. 6]
Qiu Zhijie, Tang Nannan, Wu Jian'an, Yao Huifen and Yao Huiqin and puppet theater performers and musicians, Continuum – Removing the Mountains and Filling the Sea. Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th Venice Biennale, Venice, 2017, photo provided by Qiu Zhijie.

substance and emptiness. That aesthetic choice resonates with an understanding of the world as operated by *buxi*, through endless interactions between the complementary aspects *Yin* and *Yang*. In the automated version of the performance, the mechanics that animate the images on screen are disclosed to the visitors in what can be read as a contemporary mobilization of the traditional concept of "relational knowledge" (知道 *zhi dao*), mentioned above. Such a disclosure critiques assumptions of "objective truth", by inviting visitors to learn about the conditions that constitute the artwork. Ames, calling this way of knowing "correlative thinking",[55] explains "that the only way that you can get knowledge about the world according to this logic is by making correlations between my situation and somebody else's situation. And in so doing, to try to find the best way, the most productive way, of growing the relationship."[56] In the context of the contemporary exhibition *Continuum*, correlative thinking can be read as emphasizing the relationality and situatedness of knowledge understood, I argue, as the precondition for a practice of "collaborative criticality".[57]

The concept of collaboration adopted by the show can be understood as engaging with "correlative thinking". *Continuum – Removing the Mountains and Filling the Sea* was created by a collaboration comprising folk art masters, puppet theater performers, musicians, and contemporary artists, all of whom are intrarelated parts of the world operated by "endlessness", but who engage with the world with specific artistic expertise and from specific positions. Ideally, such a relational and situated collaborative practice would facilitate innovative artistic creation, knowledge, collaborative criticality, and constructive social relations and a community of equals. Illustrating the *buxi* commitment to the "relay baton", *Continuum – Removing the Mountains and Filling the Sea* also included students from Academia di belle arti di Venezia, the art academy in Venice, who learned from the puppet masters and continued the puppet performances in the pavilion after the Chinese masters had left.

The installation series *Yashan* (2017) [Fig. 7] – collaboratively created by Wu Jian'an, Yao Huifen, and Yao Huiqin – consists of eight embroidery stretchers – that is, production frames – arranged in a row. Each stretcher shows an embroidered variation of the Southern Song-dynasty (1127–1279) painting by Li Song, *Skeleton Fantasy/Puppet Show*. The images, which are round, like the original painting, but much bigger, all depict the skeleton puppeteer performing for two women with children. While the content and the pictorial elements of the embroideries that make up the installa-

55
Ames, The Great Commentary, 1.

56
Appreciating the Chinese Difference. An interview with Roger T. Ames, November 12, 2019 (March 10, 2024).

57
I borrow this term from Wayne Modest, National Museum of World Cultures, Rotterdam.

[Fig. 7]
Wu Jian'an, Yao Huifen, and Yao Huiqin, *Yashan*, Continuum – Generation by Generation, The 57th International Art Exhibition, Pavilion of China, Ming Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai, March 31, 2017 – June 3, 2018, photo by the author.

tion are identical with Li Song's painting, the structures and colors that constitute each embroidery vary, displaying a wide variety of embroidery stitches. I see the artists' choice of a frameless medium for the installation, in combination with the aesthetic strategy of the "series", as their engagement with the temporal structure of "endlessness" and "correlative thinking". By moving along the stretchers, and through close, comparative looking, viewers potentially reflect on what constitutes the artwork, and how they may be participants in that meaning-making process.

When read through the lens of *buxi*, the artistic strategy of intermediality (*kua meiti*) adopted in the work differs from its conventional meanings conceptualized in the context of Western art history and theory.[58] In contrast to European art history, literati art did not consider artistic media as separate and in hierarchical competition with each other. In a world intrarelated through *Dao*, all literati art media, including calligraphy and painting, were understood as having the same source. The ninth-century painting historian Zhang Yanyuan famously argued that painting and writing shared origins; and seventeenth-century literati artist Shi Tao stated, "writing and painting are the two extremes of a single art, and they are accomplished in the same way".[59] Following the logic of endless change, different media retained fruitful intrarelationships. For example, the art historian Wu Hung explains how stone stele, the prime medium of calligraphic inscription, and rubbings, an early cultural reproduction technique, had a symbiotic relationship. Taking rubbings from stelae repeatedly has the long-term effect that inscriptions eventually fade. The stele would "die", but can be re-erected, that means brought to life again, based on a rubbing. Rooted in an endless temporal process, the relation between the media of a stele and a rubbing was reciprocal.[60]

The intermedial translation of the medium of painting to embroidery in the exhibition can be understood in that context, too. Seemingly emphasizing the intrarelatedness between the media of painting and embroidery, not the overall form but rather the inner

58
According to Juliane Rebentisch, intermediality in Western contemporary art is a critical engagement with modernist art media. Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation*, Frankfurt a. M. ^{7}2018 [2003], 102.

59
Francois Jullien, *The Great Painting Has no Form, or, On the Nonobject through Painting*, trans. Jane Marie Todd, Chicago/London 2009, 211.

60
Wu Hung's work on the objecthood of stele "constructed" by multiple events, namely rubbings, has informed this reading. "What a stele perpetuated was not only the material existence of the old stele but also the cycles of its birth, death, and rebirth. A stele can be defined as an object made of specific material, but its objecthood is often constructed by multiple events, including the notion of an elusive original and the creation of later replacements. A stele is an important source of historical knowledge because of its inscription; however, the practice of reproducing the inscriptions in rubbings inevitably destroys the stele's physical integrity and undermines its historical authority. Objecthood of stele can therefore never be embodied by a single image, rather it must be realized in the struggle between its survival and destruction of an object." Wu Hung, On Rubbings. Their Materiality and Historicity, in: Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu (eds.), *Writing and Materiality in China*, Cambridge, MA/London 2003, 29–72.

structures of the pictorial elements of the *Skeleton Fantasy/Puppet Show* artwork, are translated. The various embroidery stitches that make up the images can be understood as an intermedial translation of literati painting's emphasis on articulating and transmitting the world's endless transformational multiplicity through the adoption of a variety of texture brushstrokes (*cun*).

Buxi can also lend embroidery, its technique, materiality, and aesthetics, a particular meaning: the various stitches form different pictorial elements, yet everything is intrarelated through the thread and through the needlework, which resonates with the structure of Chinese processual cosmology's "intrinsic relatedness". Embroidery, like painting, follows a modular logic.[61] Similar to various texture brush strokes in literati painting, embroidery adopts various stitches to create images/world respectively. Choices of texture provide images with a specific character and atmosphere in ways that became conventionalized. In painting, there are different texture strokes for different natural phenomena, like rocks, trees, or moss for example. Artists would constitute their (artistic) self by adopting, interpreting, and combining various conventionalized texture strokes. They enact and articulate creative agency by inscribing themselves in art history, following "relay baton thinking".

In the context of the collaboration between the contemporary artist Wu Jian'an and the embroidery masters Yao Huifen and Yao Huiqin, the variety of stitches was expanded. Yao Huifen explained that she normally uses two to three stitches in her realistic decorative embroideries, but that Wu asked her to employ more than fifty stitches from the canon she refers to and to develop new stitches. Innovation here is achieved through mutual inspiration, through an experimental collaborative intermedial translation from painting to embroidery, through endless transformational processes of recontextualization and recombination.

Ideally, the collaborating artists are aware of their differences, and the hierarchies among themselves, when they commit to collaboratively create an intertextual work through reciprocal interventions. As it seems, the artists of the *Yashan* series all sought innovation through the re-activation of traditions, but from different perspectives. The embroidery master Yao Huifen explained: "The cooperation opened a door for me to see much more possibilities to renew the traditions of Su embroidery",[62] and Wu Jian'an, one could argue, learned about the embroidery technique and its conceptual potential as a contemporary art medium.

61
Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things. Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*, Princeton, NJ 2000.

62
Lin Qi, Out of the Shadows, in: *China Daily*, May 29, 2017 (February 29, 2024).

III. A Dynamic Pluriversal Approach to *Continuum – Generation by Generation* and the Controversies around the Exhibition

A dynamic pluriversal approach takes as its starting point the observation that the exhibition was on the one hand praised and on the other hand heavily criticized.[63] It seeks to show how *buxi* plays out differently in different contexts, while responding to the complexity of responses to the question posed at the beginning of this paper: "What does it mean to conceive of art, the world, and oneself as endlessly intrarelated?"

A dynamic pluriversal approach avoids the universalization and relativization of a specific meaning and critical perspective, and instead seeks to shed light on the historical, epistemological, and political situatedness of the multiple and entangled meanings and critical/decolonial perspectives that shape and reshape contemporary art as a site of transcultural exchanges and controversy in a global framework. A critical, multi-directional engagement with *buxi* as an alternative ontology and temporality of art and world contributes to the decolonization of the institutionalized conceptual and aesthetic framework of contemporary art by providing an opportunity to apply a pluriversal perspective to an art exhibition.[64] A dynamic pluriversal framework is informed by Walter Mignolo's conceptualization of the pluriverse, which rejects Western universalism and the superior position it claims for itself, and engages with "forms of knowledge and meaning exceeding the limited [Western] regulations of epistemology and hermeneutics, [and] names the principles and assumptions upon which pluriverses of meaning are constructed".[65] However, a dynamic, approach to pluriversality rejects binary thinking, essentialist conceptualizations of difference, and a universal approach to decolonization.[66] Mignolo conceives the pluriverse as a "world entangled through and by the colonial matrix

63
Footnote 9 provides an extensive list of diverse critical voices.

64
Shigemi Inaga expresses that he finds it frustrating that books such as *Critical Terms for Art History* by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff "completely disregard Oriental traditions". In his chapter on representation, for example, David Summer does not refer to non-Western concepts. Shigemi Inaga, Is Art History Globalizable. A Critical Commentary from a Far Eastern Point of View, in: James Elkins (ed.), *Is Art History Global?*, New York/London 2006, 249–279.

65
Walter Mignolo, Foreword. On Pluriversality and Multipolarity, in: Bernd Reiter (ed.), *Constructing the Pluriverse. The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, Durham, NC 2018, x.

66
Suren Pillay's important critique of the universalization of Latin American decolonial theory is useful here. Alerting us to the differences in decolonial struggles in Africa, that are not about difference but about assimilation, he argues: "To think the problem of colonialism in the present requires a comparative account of the problem of colonialism that embraces both the history of assimilation and the history of difference in a way that survives colonial assimilation." Id., The Problem of Colonialism. Assimilation, Difference, and Decolonial Theory in Africa, in: *Critical Times* 4/3, 2021, 389–416.

of power",[67] in which different cosmologies are connected along the power differential of "coloniality, covered up by the rhetorical narrative of modernity".[68] In line with Pheng Cheah's critique of Mignolo, this essay argues that today's power structures are more complex than Mignolo suggests.[69] Assuming the world as an open temporal structure of "worlding",[70] a dynamic pluriversal approach attends to, makes space for, and sheds light on the transculturally entangled multiplicity and multi-directionality of concepts, image cultures, and the various ways of knowing and being, as well as cosmologies that constitute art in the global framework. The approach is informed by Monica Juneja's conceptualization of the transcultural as an analytical method. This approach

> [...] focuses on processes through which forms [and discourses, I would add] emerge in local contexts with circuits of exchange. Contact, interaction, entanglement make the transcultural a field constituted relationally, so that asymmetry, as one attribute of relationships (together with categories such as difference, non-equivalence, dissonance) is an element that makes up this field. [...] Our research aims to investigate the multiple ways in which difference is negotiated within contact and encounters, through selective appropriation, mediation, translation, re-historizing and rereading the signs, alternatively through non-communication, rejection or resistance. Exploring the possible range of transactions built into these dynamics works as a safeguard against polar conception[s] of identity and alterity, equally against dichotomies between complete absorption and resistance, which characterize certain kind[s] of postcolonial scholarship.[71]

From a Euro-American perspective on critical global art history, the exhibition's mobilization of *buxi* has been understood and positively evaluated as a mode to transform structures of art history that

67
Mignolo, Foreword. On Pluriversality and Multipolarity, xi.

68
Ibid.

69
Pheng Cheah, *The Limits of Thinking in Decolonial Power Structures*, Townsend Center for the Humanities, November 2006 (February 29, 2024).

70
Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, Durham, NC/London 2016, 1–19.

71
Monica Juneja, Understanding Transculturalism. Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna in conversation, in: Amir Fahim et al. (eds.), *Transcultural Modernisms. Model House Research Group*, Berlin 2013, 22–33.

stood in the way of decolonizing the discipline.[72] Put simply, the conventional modern, Western, temporal and spatial regime and a hierarchical teleology cannot order or contain a world and art conditioned by "endlessness". In an intrarelated world, binary thinking, such as center and periphery, self and other, tradition versus modernity, not to mention the logic of othering that is so ingrained in the modern Western structure of thinking and being in the world, must be supplanted by radical relationality and openness.

In such a world, art is not in a representational relation to the world. As an intrarelational part of the world, understood as continuous process, art is conceived as an ontological force of generating the endless process that is the world, conceived as a continuous process of "worlding"[73] and therefore "relieved" of the burden to represent.

Conventional art history conceives of art objects as temporally stable entities that are made sense of by slotting them into chronologically ordered periods and national or regional frameworks, temporally and spatially bounded units of investigations. Art conceived through the lens of *buxi*, though dependent upon traditional Chinese thought, resonates powerfully with recent discourses in art history that emphasize art's temporal instability as the condition to reconceptualize artworks as agents of alternative anachronic and heterochronic models of history writing and worlding, and world making respectively.[74]

According to this idiom of critique, in a world conceived as endless process, the universalization of specific concepts cannot be successful. While this critique is useful to the Euro-American per-

72
Among these voices were, for example: Charles Esche and Annie Fletcher (Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven), who wrote about the show: "Continuum is an important exhibition not only for China but for the art world's image of itself. The core art world is still dominated by a western-centric, colonial state of mind that seeks to exclude what it can't subsume and doesn't understand. The worst commentators on art see their local modernist protocols as the only, universal option for art and artists to follow. Continuum challenges this myopia. It allows contemporary art to flow from different roots, not only the trauma of colonialism and alienation but also traditions that are despised within the modern-colonial matrix. This is surely a liberation for the general possibilities of thinking what art could become. The mostly US commentators who have criticized the show for being aligned to Chinese state policy completely miss two things: one, the critical humor and complexity in much of the work in the pavilion; two, their own complicity with US state policy and its continuous bid for global hegemony in all fields." Qiu Zhijie, Continuum – Generation by Generation, 10. Readings of the exhibition by Kurosawa Hiromi (21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa) and Davide de Quadrio (long term collaborator of Qiu Zhijie and recently director of Museo d'Arte Orientale, Turin) were included in the catalog of the exhibition *Continuum* and in the iteration of the show in Shanghai. See also: Davide de Quadrio, Dispersing Knowledge. The Case of Qiu Zhijie Curating the China Pavilion in the 2017 Venice Biennale. What We Can Learn from This Artistic and Curatorial Practice, in: Mary Sherman (ed.), *International Opportunities in the Arts*, Wilmington, DE 2019, 439–450.

73
Here the concept of *buxi* can be understood as resonating with "worlding", an ontological concept of the world as a process of temporalization, conceptualized by literary scholar Pheng Cheah informed by Martin Heidegger. Cheah, What Is a World?, 1–19.

74
For example: Eva Kernbauer, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions since 1990*, New York/London 2022; Keith Moxey, What Time Is It in the History of Art?, in: Dan Karlholm and Keith Moxey (eds.), *Time in the History of Art. Temporality, Chronology, Anachrony*, London/New York 2020, 26–42; Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York 2010.

spective, it cannot be universally applied, but rather must be understood primarily through the longer discursive history of critiquing "Western representationalism".[75] In the awareness that "Western representationalism" and the critiques of it have been universalized as an effect of Western colonialism and imperialism, a pluriversal approach examines how discourses of art, philosophy, and politics in specific locales have been occupied with specific questions, premises, and assumptions regarding art and its relation to time, temporality, and the world respectively. Adopting a critical historiographical perspective, a pluriversal approach here seeks to understand how specific questions have been or can be articulated in relation to local conceptual histories and socio-political contexts, and in specific transcultural constellations and negotiations.

Even though I am aware that the history that I am going to sketch here is much more complex and needs further unpacking, I argue that the criticism of *buxi* as potentially denying individual freedom can be understood in the context of a longer history of critiquing the obligation to intrarelate.

Frank Perkins argues, from a comparative philosophical perspective, that while European philosophical inquiries into the nature of reality have

> tended to center on problems of reconciliation (how ontologically distinct things can interact), Chinese metaphysics has been more concerned with problems of distinction. The most central problems are around the status of individualized things, the relationship between the patterns of nature and specifically human values, and how to understand the ultimate ground of the world in a way that avoids either reification or nihilism. These become problems precisely because of the underlying assumptions of holism and change.[76]

The comparison of different temporal modes of meaning making and subject constitution by the scholar of Chinese and comparative philosophy Hans-Georg Möller is useful in this regard. According to him, a traditional Chinese semiotic paradigm of presence differs significantly from a se miotic structure of representation.[77] Instead of assuming a dualistic relation between signifier and significant, that is, instead of conceiving the signifier as an arbitrary label attached to things *a posteriori*, a semiotic structure of presence con-

75
Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, NC 2007; Lee, Chronophobia.

76
Perkins, Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy.

77
Hans-Georg Möller, Before and after Representation, in: *Semiotica* 143/1, 2003, 69–77.

ceives of signifier and significant as equally present.[78] Following the logic of a semiotics of presence, for example, the title (the signifier) of a minister (the signified) did not represent a minister. Instead, it was by assuming – that is, by uniting and becoming one with – the title (the signifier) that "both may be present: the title (the signifier), a minister (the signified) assumes, makes the official function present".[79] In other words, according to the logic of a semiotics of presence, signifying practices serve the purpose to involve everything, every fact, and every person thus constituting the world as functional participants in an intrarelational political, social, and even cosmological order. The strong ordering function of this semiotic structure of presence is tightly connected with a concept of reality, according to which everything is conceived as intrarelated, in which "every element of an ordered whole like a member of a family, a minister of state, or a celestial body in the cosmos, had to maintain a certain function".[80] Literati art's function beyond representation can be linked to semiotic assumptions of presence and its respective system and concept of order. Writing calligraphy, or enacting written Chinese characters and their accompanying aesthetic and social values as a recipient, meant to unite with, and by so doing, constitute one's self as, an intrarelational, functional participant in a certain social and political order, whose continuity in turn was ensured through "functional participatory" practices such as calligraphy. It is evident that against this background, the representational attribution of meaning would have not only severely disturbed the semiotic structure of presence but also existentially threatened the accompanying system of social order. According to Möller, representation was the "'threat of all threats' because it would lead to chaos in so far as it would introduce a divergent structure of time and meaning production and in consequence interrupt not only the functioning of the semiotic structure of presence and its respective ordering system"[81] but also the related political order.

Critical Chinese voices of the exhibition's mobilization of *buxi* as nationalistic and traditionalist and too close to the official political authoritarian agenda have to be understood in the context of how the Chinese government has been coopting discourses of Chinese tradition including *buxi*.

Xi Jinping, current president of the Peoples' Republic of China, has been using the term "endlessness" (*buxi*) in the context of his nationalist self-strengthening agenda. He has been praising 5000

78
Ibid., 75. In the context of Confucianism, this logic served and guaranteed the continuity of a specific administrative and bureaucratic reality and its related social order. According to the Daoist worldview, it ensured the continuity of a physiological and organic reality.

79
Ibid.

80
Ibid.

81
Ibid., 76.

years of civilizational history in China as the "only civilization in the world that has continued since ancient times and has never been interrupted" and "how China's achievements in various fields are superior and show the innovative spirit of the Chinese nation, advancing with the times and self-strengthening without stopping [endlessly] (自强不息 *ziqiang buxi*)".[82] Conceiving the "field of history and civilization" as a struggle,[83] Xi stresses the role of Chinese tradition as a tool to instill "cultural self-confidence" and to enable continuity and continuous rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.[84] Robert Elliott Allinson would argue that Xi Jinping's perspective on history and development can be understood as an endless struggle as informed by Mao Zedong, who referred to the "*Yijing* as a model for dialectical development" in order to conceptualize revolution and class struggle as an "endless" process, operated by "endless" change.[85] Xi Jinping's interest in *buxi* clearly serves the authoritarian agenda to ensure the continuity of his and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) power, and to make claims about China's superiority in the world and in the history of world civilization respectively. The governing effect of a world conceived as endlessly intrarelated, sketched out above, serves him and the CCP well, to involve everyone as a "functional participant" in the prescribed totalitarian social and political order.

The rejection of Qiu Zhijie's mobilization of *buxi* within China can be understood in this context. Referring to Qiu Zhijie's larger written and artistic oeuvre, a case can be made for understanding the show's employment of "endlessness" and "change" – in contrast to the official discourse – as a critical tool of deconstruction, Western critique, decolonization, pluralization, and transculturalization of art, its conceptual histories, and worldviews. However, the question remains if the current political climate in China will allow for such a critical reading of *buxi* to emerge within China. Or, to put

82
Xi Jinpin, Jianshe Zhongguo tese Zhongguo fengge Zhongguo qipai de kaoguxue, genghao renshi yuanyuanliuchang bodajingshen de Zhonghua wenming 建设中国特色中国风格中国气派的考古学 更好认识源远流长博大精深的中华文明 (Developing an archaeology with Chinese Te-Se, Chinese style and Chinese characteristics, to understand the Chinese civilization better, which has a long history and is profound).

83
Allinson, The Philosophical Influences of Mao Zedong, 100–102.

84
Ibid.

85
"Mao's embrace of dialectics, especially his understanding of the dialectical philosophy of the ancient, Chinese philosophy of the *Yijing*, a philosophy that predated Confucius, is key to understanding the situation of China today and an argument for maintaining its ties to the classical, Chinese contribution to an ethical world. [...] The difference with Hegelian dialectics is that the opposites in Hegel are not characterized by *yin* and *yang*, which are complementary and are not (and should not be construed as) antagonistic. The interaction between *yin* and *yang* is the principle of change. The movement of the *yin* and *yang* is one of reversal. In contrast, the movement of the Hegelian dialectic is that of an upward spiral." Mao's dialectics informed by the *Yijing* could be considered even more effective with regards to endless revolution and class struggle, since its end isn't synthesis but endless change (*buxi*), which Mao, in contrast to the traditional Confucian concept, doesn't understand as harmonious but as endless struggle. Ibid., 102, 101.

it another way, how further critical historiographical analyses and contextualizations of *buxi* discourses by Qiu Zhijie would have better facilitated a productive critical discourse on *buxi* as an "operating mechanism" in Chinese art.

IV. Conclusion

Instead of dismissing the exhibition mobilization of *buxi* as nationalist, traditionalist, or un-contemporary, this paper suggests employing a dynamic pluriversal perspective to shed light on the complex discourses that constitute *Continuum – Generation by Generation* (*buxi* 不息) and the multiple responses that can be given to the question "What does it mean to conceive of art, the world, and oneself as endlessly intrarelated"? The exhibition, this paper argues, is an ideal case study of how contemporary art in the global framework is a contested field of continuous negotiation. Shaped and reshaped through transcultural exchanges and controversies, engagement with contemporary art demands continuous self-reflection and attendance to the multiple and multi-directional histories, epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies that constitute contemporary art and a pluriversal critical and aesthetic framework(s).

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MONUMENTS, TEMPORALITY, AND THE AESTHETICS OF INDIGENOUS PRESENCE IN POSTCOLONIAL SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Despite their increasing visibility on highways and in prominent spaces in cities and villages across Nagaland and Naga-inhabited regions in northeast India since the early 1990s, monuments to the history of Naga nationalism have failed to garner significant scholarly attention. On the one hand, they are dismissed by urban Nagas as passive illustrations of the ideologically motivated "agendas" of Naga nationalist organizations. On the other, their continuities with the Naga stone monolith form remain unaddressed, rooted in the longstanding assumption that the influx of Christianity and literacy has meant that "tribal culture" is ruptured from the present. If the former approach suffers from a limiting historicism that imprisons the monument within a preconceived sense of historical and chronological time, the latter reproduces the problem of essentialism, which denies the Naga stone monolith any time. In this article, I challenge the dismissal of these monuments on both historicist and essentialist grounds. I demonstrate that their formal, scalar, and spatial particularities materialize a monumental form that constantly slips across the border between the secular domain of the war monument and the ritual domain of the Naga stone monolith. This movement across these supposedly separate and opposed domains of practice enacts a plural and layered temporality, which foregrounds monumentality as the ground to engage the lived realities and histories of a borderland region. It also illuminates the political significance of the aesthetic in the Indigenously inhabited and politically contested region amidst its marginalization by the state in postcolonial South Asia.

KEYWORDS

Monuments; Art; Visual culture; Indigeneity; Nagaland; South Asia; Postcolonial; Decolonial; Borderlands; Temporality; Aesthetics and Politics.

I. Introduction

Two large stone columns, approximately 30 feet high and erected on the valley-facing side of National Highway 29 (hereafter, NH 29) greet the passing motorist as they approach Khonoma village from Kohima in Nagaland [Fig. 1 and Fig. 2]. Nagaland is a state in India's northeast where 87 percent of the approximately two million strong population is Indigenous – self-identifying as Tribal – and 95 percent Christian. Khonoma is about an hour's drive west of Kohima, the capital of Nagaland and one of the most prosperous villages in the state. Both columns stand on landscaped and manicured terraces constructed just off the thoroughfare, overlooking a picturesque valley dotted with tin-roofed and thatched houses, agricultural fields, and forests. Surrounded by ample car-park space, benches, and perches from which to admire the breathtaking views of the valley below, the terraces are a welcome distraction for travelers negotiating the pot-holed highway. A Flower Islet and restroom constructed roughly halfway between them add to their appeal as pit-stops [Fig. 3]. But the sense of welcome created by these built elements is disrupted by the messages that the monuments carry. Inscribed on the most prominent thoroughfare-facing plaque of one of the two monuments are the words: "Nagas are not Indians; their territory is not a part of the Indian Union. We shall uphold and defend this unique truth at all costs and always."

Similarly, the second monument proclaims that Khonoma "defends the right of their people as a nation". The statements point to the fact that until a little over two decades ago, Nagaland was home to a longstanding transregional and transnational armed movement for political autonomy from the Indian state for an independent Naga nation, waged by Naga groups across northeast India and northwestern Myanmar. The armed movement for Greater Nagalim or Nagaland lasted from approximately 1953 to 1997, when Naga nationalist organizations and the Indian armed forces signed a ceasefire agreement, which remains the basis of a tenuous stability until today. Erected in 2007 and 2011 respectively, the monuments have appeared at a time when the Indian state is promoting Nagaland as a tourist destination by publicizing it as the "land of tribal culture". Although this process has been ongoing since India's economic reforms of 1991–1992, it strengthened considerably in the post-ceasefire period.[1] This is best illustrated by the Hornbill Festival, an annual commercial fair, based on the festivals that its many Tribal communities celebrate annually, that the Nagaland State Government started in 2000. But it also extends to multiple eco-tourism ventures that have sprouted up all over

[1] Akhil Gupta and Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan (eds.), *The State in India after Liberalization. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, New York 2011.

[Fig. 1]
Monument to the memory of Khrisanisa Seyie, 2007, stone and mixed media, approx. 914.5 × 189 × 30.5 cm, Khonoma, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 2]
Monument to the memory of General Mowu Gwizantsu, 2011, stone and mixed media, approx. 914.5 × 189 × 189 cm, Khonoma, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 3]
Flower Islet on National Highway 29, Khonoma, c. 2011, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

Nagaland, created to bring tourists and economic opportunities to villages such as Khonoma.[2]

The monuments enact a challenge to the Indian state's ongoing practices of enclosure through the messages they proclaim, and the scalar and spatial prominence accorded to them on the highway. One of the monumental forms the pillars draw on is the modern war monument associated with the commemoration of the Battle of Kohima of 1944, which marked a significant chapter in the history of World War II. But when I inquired after the political significance of their installation in the post-ceasefire period, a Naga nationalist activist responded by stating that "These memorials cannot be called a political project, just a post-death family practice to keep their memory alive, what they did, what they died for".

It was their primary function as memorials to the deceased individuals, he added, that happened to signal the history of the Naga nationalist struggle to the current generation of Nagas and outsiders alike. Instead of the secular form of the modern war monument, his statement emphasized their ties to the Naga stone monolith. This is a monumental form erected in remembrance of deceased male figures who are celebrated by their kin and the village community as "warriors". Historically, stone monoliths carry little or no embellishment and are typically erected outside the boundary of the village or ward in which the deceased lived. In Tenyidie, the language spoken in the district of Kohima, the monolith is called "Tsiese" or "planted stone".[3] Stone has an animate quality in this monumental form, based on the belief that the spirit of the male warrior resides in the monolith and protects the village from other malevolent spirits. The warrior spirit also permeates the land where the monolith is 'planted', enriching it, and thereby offering respite to weary travelers or people returning to the village. These are qualities shared by the monuments on the highway, which are erected outside the Khonoma village gateway and double up as resting spots for passing motorists.

But despite their increasing visibility on highways and in prominent spaces in cities and villages since the early 1990s, monuments to the history of the Naga nationalist movement have failed to garner significant scholarly attention. On the one hand, they are dismissed by urban Nagas as passive illustrations of the ideologically motivated "agendas" of Naga nationalist organizations. On the other, their continuities with the Naga stone monolith form remain unaddressed. Both approaches reflect the force of the modernist idea of temporality as chronology that is "ruptured" from the past. They are characterized by a limiting historicism that imprisons the monument within a preconceived sense of historical and chrono-

2 For example, Amarjyoti Borah, India 'Green Village' Turns Tables on Hunters, in: *Al-Jazeera*, June 5, 2014 (June 10, 2022).

3 Asanuo Savino Yhome-Heneise, personal communication with the author, January 2020.

logical time that only considers the immediate human actors who created them, which reflects the primacy accorded to the immediate moment and time of the creation of modern monuments privileged in art historical analyses.[4] They also reproduce the problem of essentialism, which denies the Naga stone monolith any time, rooted in the longstanding assumption that the influx of Christianity and literacy has meant that "stories are no longer told by stones".[5]

In this article, I challenge the way the monument to Naga nationalism is rendered invisible on both historicist and essentialist grounds by highlighting how its expanding visibility across Nagaland and Naga-inhabited regions in northeast India enacts a plural and layered temporality. In *Anachronic Renaissance*, Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood argue that the artwork's ability to "anachronize" challenges the historicism of European art history, demonstrating that art functions as "a token of power, in its time, precisely by complicating time, by reactivating prestigious forebears, by comparing events across time, by fabricating memories".[6] But in South Asia and the study of Indigenous art and visual culture at large, historicism is less of a problem than essentialism. Nagel and Wood's concept of "plural temporality" is just as useful in countering an essentialist image of the Naga stone monolith as it is in opposing the historicism that underlies the absence of scholarship on the monuments on NH 29. But, as Prathama Banerjee argues, a lack of historical thinking is still a problem in South Asian studies of Indigeneity, in which Tribal communities are typically not "recognized as embodiments of past histories".[7] The complex temporality of Naga Indigeneity and Naga nationalism constituted by the highway monuments is best understood as a "layered temporality", as discussed by Kajri Jain in *Gods in the Time of Democracy*. Jain argues that monumental statues of religious and political figures in post-reform India do "not follow an either/or, then/now logic of linear succession", but are instead "a matter of additive layering and interaction".[8] Following Jain, I undertake a processual analysis of the monuments on NH 29 as an assemblage, a bundle of multiple processes or "object-events that belong both to the moment and space of these processes' convergence and to multiple other

4
James E. Young, Memory/Monument, in: Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (eds.), *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago 2003, 234–247.

5
Stuart Blackburn, The Stories Stones Tell. Naga Oral Stories and Culture, in: Michael Oppitz, Thomas Kaiser, Alban von Stockhausen, and Marion Wettstein (eds.), *Naga Identities. Changing Local Cultures in the Northeast of India*, Gent 2008, 259–270, here 262.

6
Alexander Nagel and Christopher S Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York 2012, 13; 18.

7
Prathama Banerjee, Writing the Adivasi. Some Historiographical Notes, in: *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 53/1, 2016, 131–153, here 146–147.

8
Kajri Jain, Gods in the Time of Automobility, in: *Current Anthropology*, 58, supp. 15, 2017, S13–S26, here S22.

space-times", which also helps explain their public dismissal today as merely "agendas".[9] Their formal, scalar, and spatial particularities materialize a monumental form that constantly slips across the discursive border that separates the secular domain of the war monument from the ritual domain of the Naga stone monolith. This movement across these supposedly separate and opposed domains of practice exemplifies the plural and layered temporality of Indigenous presence amidst its marginalization by the state in postcolonial South Asia.[10]

II. India and Indigeneity

Much like the tensions that surround how to identify the monuments on NH 29, the term Indigenous remains deeply contested in India. Nagas self-identify as Tribal, though the term Indigenous has gained traction in the work of Naga scholars.[11] I do not use the term Indigenous in an identitarian capacity. As a non-Naga art historian, I use it to highlight the nature of presence that the memorial monuments perform as they slip across the ritually constituted domain of the Naga stone monolith and the secular domain of the war monument. This slippage does not simply challenge salvage and historicist terms of recognition. It also constitutes a presence that defies the colonial forms of relationality that characterize the Indian state's co-option and disavowal of Adivasi and Tribal struggles "into a more singular narrative of 'tribal' belonging".[12] This defiant presence resonates with what Indigenous scholars in the set-

9
Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Time of Democracy*, Durham, NC 2021, 10.

10
Although Nagel and Wood's model of "plural temporality" and Kajri Jain's model of "layered temporality" arise from profoundly different materials, they illuminate proximate though distinct ideas about the temporality of the monuments at the center of this study. "Plural temporality" explains how cultural practitioners draw upon religious and secular understandings of creation as resources to make new monuments, in the process recalling/anticipating multiple pasts/futures. For Nagel and Wood, it is the period of the Renaissance when the co-existence of the idea of the image (or, the model of substitution) and of authorship (or, the model of art) becomes significant, which reveals a linear understanding of the temporality of art and its gradual secularization. Distinct from this idea, "layered temporality" explains the continuing interactions between religious/ritual and secular frames of reference in the Naga monuments from the mid-twentieth century onwards, such that each discussed instance enacts the ever-layering contemporaneity of the ritual frame of the stone monolith and the secular frame of the war monument. In drawing on both these models of temporality, I highlight the presence of the linear idea of transition from a religious to secular frame of reference in the emergence of the Naga monuments without relegating the religious/ritual frame to the past, by accounting for the continuing – and continually changing – relevance of religious/ritual forms as well. For a fuller discussion of the co-presence of these temporalities, see Kajri Jain, Gods in the Time of Democracy, 13–18.

11
Arkotong Longkumer and Dolly Kikon, The Unfinished Business of Colonialism. Naga Ancestral Remains and the Healing of the Land, in: *Morung Express*, June 1, 2022 (October 20, 2022).

12
Daniel J. Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta, Indigenous Pasts and the Politics of Belonging, in: eid. (eds.), *Politics of Belonging in India. Becoming Adivasi*, London 2011, 1–13, here 8.

tler-colonial context of Indigeneity in North America have articulated as survivance and resurgence. The Anishnaabe writer Gerald Vizenor identifies survivance as the persistence of Indigeneity as "more than survival, more than endurance or mere response" and as a mode of presence rather than "mere simulation in a museum".[13] Relatedly, the Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg scholar and artist Leanne Simpson highlights "resurgence" as a form of recollecting histories of loss and dispossession "not as a mourning of loss but as a way of living" in an Indigenous "present that collapses both the past and the future".[14] By studying what the highway monuments tell us about the nature of Indigenous presence amidst the conditions of dispossession faced by India's Tribal and Adivasi communities, I supplement the work of scholars who have tracked the identitarian significance of terms such as Adivasi and/or Tribal. Among others, Virginius Xaxa has highlighted their worth as tools that empower approximately "104.3 million" people who fall outside India's dominant socio-cultural and religious formations such as Hinduism, which remain "key pillars of Indian national identity", against marginalization and exclusion from rights, resources, and aspirations.[15]

Ultimately, I show that the significance of the monuments on NH 29 is first aesthetic and then ideological. Rather than dismiss their association with the war monument form, I demonstrate how the efficacy of the stone monolith form gives the contemporary Naga monuments greater symbolic purchase as icons of the Naga nationalist struggle. Similarly, the stone monolith's ties to embodied conceptions of land intensifies the Naga memorial monuments' performance of claims to land as territory. In doing so, my research builds on Kajri Jain, Richard Davis, and Finbarr Barry Flood's scholarship on the modern and contemporary image cultures of religious and/or ritual practice. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's seminal text, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Jain, Davis, and Flood variously demonstrate through their studies that modernity or the age of mass reproducibility does not render religion obsolete. Rather, they show that the contemporaneity of images and objects shaped by religious and/or ritual practice is informed by the "oscillation" and interaction between its religious/ritual and exhibitionary "modes of reception".[16] Similarly, I

13
Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses. Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence*, Lincoln, NE/London 1998, 15; Gerald Vizenor, Manifest Manners. The Long Gaze of Christopher Columbus, in: *boundary 2* 19/3, 1992, 223–235, here 230.

14
Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done. Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Minneapolis 2017, 2.

15
Virginius Xaxa, Tribes and Indian National Identity. Location of Exclusion and Marginality, in: *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 23/1, 2016, 223–237, here 224–225.

16
Jain, Gods in the Time of Democracy, 175; also, Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, Princeton, NJ 1997, 14–50; Finbarr Barry Flood, Between Cult and Culture. Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum, in: *The Art Bulletin* 84/4, 2002, 641–659.

show that the Naga monument's slippage or "oscillation" between the stone monolith and war monument forms renders them politically efficacious within the secular terms of history, territoriality, identity, and Indigenous rights today.

There are three object-centric events spread across the mid to late twentieth century that animate the emergence of the Naga monuments on NH 29. These moments are tied to major chapters in Naga history, associated with World War II, the regional ascendance of evangelical Christian ideas of a Naga Christian theology and Catholic ideas of inculturation and liberation theology, and India's economic reforms of 1991–1992.

III. War and the Sensory Fabric of Public Memory

The first monument one sees on the approach to Khonoma from Kohima is dedicated to the memory of Khrisanisa Seyie. Seyie was the first President of the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN), constituted in 1953 by the Naga National Council (NNC) after the armed Naga nationalist movement had begun [Fig. 4].[17] Although erected in 2007, the roughly cut edges and unpolished surface of the monument made from a single slab of stone suggests that it has been made to look aged like a conventional stone monolith. A granite roundel above the main plaque carries the words "Ura Uvie" or "our land is ours", a nationalist slogan made famous by members of the NNC in the 1950s. Roughly 200 meters ahead and made from a more precisely cut slab of stone, the second monument is dedicated to "General" Mowu Gwizantsu, who served as the "Commander-in-Chief" of the Naga Federal Army (NFA), which is the armed military wing of the FGN [Fig. 5]. A column with four equally sized sides, this monument is embellished with several plaques that carry inscriptions in English that celebrate Gwizantsu's many achievements. For instance, they mention that he "walked with other Naga fighters to Bangladesh, Burma and People's Republic of China" and "visited 13 other nations in Asia, Europe & North America on special missions".

References to the deceased figure's military pursuits highlight the monument's ties to the constitutive object-event of the Kohima War Cemetery [Fig. 6]. This cemetery was established in the aftermath of the historic Battle of Kohima of 1944, when the Allied Forces wrested back control of the erstwhile Naga Hills District from the Japanese military that had invaded and briefly occupied it. Constructed in 1946 by the British War Graves Commission, the cemetery sits across multiple terraces of a hill that today overlooks a bustling hub of the city. It is also plugged into a circuit of tourism animated by the fact that the war of 1944 was pronounced one of the most consequential British battles in a vote conducted by Britain's

17 The NNC spearheaded the Naga nationalist movement.

[Fig. 4]
A closer view of the monument to the memory of Khrisanisa Seyie, 2007, stone and mixed media, approx. 914.5 × 189 × 30.5 cm, Khonoma, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 5]
A closer view of the monument to the memory of Gen. Mowu Gwizantsu, 2011, stone and mixed media, approx. 914.5 × 189 × 189 cm, Khonoma, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 6]
Kohima War Cemetery, 1946, Kohima, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

National Army Museum in 2013.[18] But the site's celebration within the globally circulated idea of heritage does not mention that it constitutes the first large-scale and concentrated accumulation of Christian tombstones within the secular frame of exhibition – to draw on a term from Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* – in the erstwhile Naga Hills District. Existing accounts also largely overlook the fact that the cemetery includes a Naga stone monolith, mounted on a rectangular stone brick plinth on its lowest terrace [Fig. 7]. According to the Worcestershire Regiment's records, the monolith was brought from its sequestered location outside Maram village to the cemetery "with the assistance of the Naga Hillsmen". This claim is supported by the roughly cut nature of the stone, which resembles stone monoliths erected outside Naga villages.[19] The inclusion of a Christian cross on the pillar, alongside the inscription, "When you go home, tell them of us and say for your tomorrow we gave our today",[20] collectively demonstrate that the monolith was re-purposed into a war monument.

The impact of the cemetery as a technology of commensuration becomes vividly apparent in Jotsoma village, approximately 11 kilometers west of Kohima. Just outside the entrance to the village gate stands a modest courtyard housing nine tombstones to male figures who played a role in the Naga nationalist movement. The tombstones date to between the 1940s and the early 2000s. Among these stands one that was erected in 1953, shortly after the construction of the Kohima War Cemetery [Fig. 8]. It bears the inscription "Zasibituo Naga, Zotshuma [Jotsoma] village, a national leader, died in the freedom struggle of the Naga independence, murdered by Indian, on Saturday 18th October 1952, at 10:30 AM".

Confirmed by the historian and priest Rev. Savito Nagi, this tombstone was erected to remember Zasibituo Nagi, a resident of Jotsoma who died when the local police fired upon a public gathering that was rallying around the cause of Naga autonomy a year before the movement became an armed struggle.[21] About four and a half feet high, it is larger than a conventional tombstone. The detailed account of the moment of passing it records resembles inscriptions found on war monuments. Much like a Naga stone monolith, it is erected outside the boundary of Jotsoma. These features collectively suggest that it emerges through a process of

18
Jasper Copping, Second World War Clashes Named as 'Greatest British Battle', in: *The Telegraph*, April 20, 2013 (March 12, 2024).

19
Burma 1944–1945, in: *Worcestershire Regiment* (May 15, 2022).

20
The epitaph was composed by John Maxwell Edmonds, a Cambridge classicist and inspired by the ancient Greek "poet Simonides of Ceos". See Bob Cook, *Kohima Epitaph*, November 23, 2013 (May 15, 2022).

21
Rev. Savito Nagi, personal communication with the author, February 2017.

[Fig. 7]
The Naga stone monolith in the Kohima War Cemetery, c. 1946, stone and mixed media, approx. 762 × 213 × 61 cm, Kohima, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 8]
The monolith erected in the memory of Zasibituo Nagi, c. 1953, stone, approx. 123 × 61 × 20 cm, Jotsoma, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

commensuration, effected by the cemetery, between the exhibitionary value of the war monument and the ritually significant – what Walter Benjamin might call the "cultic" – value of the Naga stone monolith. Nagi is also recalled as "Naga" in the inscription on the stone, which revises the deceased's ethnically particular name to the by then politically constitutive term "Naga". This speaks to the expanded political address of the novel monolith-war monument assemblage, supported by the fact that Nagi is remembered by villagers as the first "martyr" to the cause of Naga sovereignty.[22] The appearance of this monument thus marks an aesthetic event, constituting a new sensory fabric to Naga public memory associated with the struggle for political autonomy. Henceforth, it also becomes available for further reconfigurations in monumentalized forms.

IV. To Be "Christian within Our Own Traditional Structure"[23]

Unlike the conventional Naga stone monolith, both monuments on NH 29 incorporate new material in addition to stone such as concrete and granite. They also incorporate elements associated with the iconography of the tombstone. For instance, Seyie's monument bears a large Christian cross and the inscription on it mentions that it was unveiled with a dedication prayer conducted by a Baptist priest. The monuments carry icons drawn from Naga cultural forms other than the stone monolith as well. In Gwizantsu's monument, the top of the pillar recreates the iconic high roof and cross-horn motif associated with the Naga *morung* or "house of many", which refers to the regional cultural form of the Tribal dormitory. Historically, these gender specific dormitories, mostly for men, were politically significant institutions where the youth of the village resided away from their parental home to learn the shared traditions of their community. It is also where the adults of the village, recognized as "warriors", lived during periods of strife, rituals, and festivals. Today, *morungs* occupy a largely ceremonial presence in Nagaland, although they continue to be preserved, renovated, and sometimes decorated during festivals. They are also harnessed as an image of Naga*ness*, for instance, as a brand logo by Nagaland Tourism and as part of the name of the Naga newspaper, the *Morung Express*.

Until the late twentieth century, the fluid incorporation of icons and motifs associated with Naga Tribal practices alongside Christian forms of remembrance was unprecedented, and in fact strongly discouraged by the Baptist Church in Nagaland. So, what informs this shift in the monumental assemblages on NH 29, which is not accounted for by the object-event of the Kohima War Cemetery? Two quite disparate sites in Kohima's built environment collectively offer an answer to this question. The first of these is the Mary

22 Ibid.

23 V. K. Nuh, *Nagaland Church and Politics*, Kohima 1986, 49.

Help of Christians Church or Cathedral of Kohima. Located on a hillside in the northern part of Kohima city, it is the first prominent Naga church to draw on vernacular forms of architecture [Fig. 9]. Designed by the architects Revathi and Vasant Kamath and conceptualized by Rev. Abraham Alangimattathil, the cathedral is a modernist reinterpretation of the *morung*.[24] Its raised roofs emulate the *morung*'s iconic sloping roof while the bare metal scaffolding resembles the imposing wooden pillars that support it. Erected at the entrance to the main prayer hall, the over-sized sculpture of the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus painted in a metallic silver similarly offers a Christian reinterpretation of the wood-carved *morung* house-front. At the time that it was built over 1986–1989, the cathedral represented the most emphatic articulation of Christianity through Naga cultural icons, reiterating Christianity to be a part of Naga Indigeneity. As such, it constituted another significant object-event in the history of the monuments on NH 29, enabling the emergence of Naga cultural icons from their conventionally sequestered site associated with the village *morung* into public spaces and as part of a wider cross-denominational visual culture of Naga Christianity and Naga nationalism.

The impact of the cathedral became apparent in 1990, when a monument was erected in honor of Angami Zaphu Phizo [Fig. 10]. Phizo was the longest serving president of the NNC and remains the most celebrated icon of the Naga nationalist movement. Constructed on a landscaped terrace outside the Nagaland Secretariat, Phizo's monument shares characteristics with the Christian tombstone and the war monument. This is apparent in the large Christian cross it bears, the landscaped terrace on which it is constructed, and the lengthy inscription it carries, which states "A.Z. Phizo Father of the Nation Here Rests the man Who Gave His All For His People 16.05.1904–30.4.1990".

The presence of flower wreaths at the base of the monument demonstrates its incorporation into the cyclical temporality of Christian remembrance not associated with the Naga stone monolith. But the roughly cut nature of the stone and the spears that flank the entrance to the site highlight its proximity to the visual culture of the male "warrior" associated with the stone monolith, showcased in *morung* carvings, and as part of their ceremonial attire. Significantly, the fact that the monument is erected outside the entrance to the Nagaland Secretariat suggests that much like the monolith guards the village, Phizo's column is meant to guard the political constituency of Nagaland itself.

The creative reinterpretations of the stone monolith and war monument forms unfolded over the late 1980s and early 1990s, when evangelical Christian ideas of a Naga Christian theology and Catholic ideas of inculturation and liberation theology gained widespread and cross-denominational purchase in Nagaland. This was in

[24] Fr. George Punnolil, personal communication with the author, July 2022.

[Fig. 9]
The Mary Help of Christians Church or Cathedral of Kohima, c. 1986–1989, stone, metal, and mixed media, Kohima, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 10]
The Angami Zaphu Phizo Memorial, 1990, stone, approx. 1066 × 244 × 31 cm, Kohima, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

marked contrast to the mid to late twentieth century, when American and Naga Baptists regarded Naga Tribal practices as contrary to Christian faith, stemming from the Baptist Christian moral imperative to separate human subjects from material things in order to affirm the belief that agency resides in humans and god.[25] But from the late 1980s onwards, Naga Christian leaders began to advocate for a wider embrace of the region's Tribal culture as the ground for an Indigenous Christian theology. For instance, in *Nagaland Church and Politics* (1986), the former Naga nationalist soldier and later Baptist priest and Naga nationalist activist, V. K. Nuh called Naga culture "heritage that embodies inter-generational wisdom", proclaiming that it was possible for people to be "Christian within our own traditional structure".[26] Nuh also advocated for the Church to be more responsive to the suffering the Nagas faced at the hands of the Indian Army and as a fallout of inter-factional violence between competing Naga nationalist organizations. Nuh's writings reflect that he embraced these ideas at a time when Hindu nationalism was in ascendance across India. Nuh was also the priest who unveiled the monument in [Fig. 1] with a dedication prayer. At the time, he was the General Secretary of the Council of Naga Baptist Churches (CNBC), an organization that was established in 1987 to encourage Nagas to actively participate in "national life" as a matter of Christian faith.[27] The 1990s was also a time when, spurred by the global spread of ideas of inculturation shaped by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), Naga Christian leaders began to advocate for a wider embrace of the region's Tribal culture as the ground for an inculturated understanding of Naga Christianity.[28] For instance, the Roman Catholic priest and anthropologist Abraham Lotha, writing in an essay titled *In Search of the God of the Nagas* (1992), states that "if Christianity is to contribute to the preservation of Naga culture and, more important, if it is to become meaningful, personal and relevant to the Nagas, it must be inculturated".[29] Against this backdrop, the Cathedral of Kohima, and the memorial to Phizo render the theological and political commensuration articulated by Nuh and Lotha visible in aesthetic ways. Viewed in the light of this history, the object-event of the Cathedral of Kohima enables

25
Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*, Berkeley, CA 2007.

26
Nuh, Nagaland Church and Politics, 49.

27
John Thomas, *Evangelising the Nation. Religion and the Formation of Naga Political Identity*, Abingdon/New York 2016, 197.

28
On the impact of the Second Vatican Council on other sites of cultural practice, see David Lehmann, *Struggle for the Spirit. Religious Transformation and Popular Culture in Brazil and Latin America*, Cambridge, MA 1996.

29
Abraham Lotha, *The Raging Mithun. Challenges of Naga Nationalism*, Kohima 2013, 76.

Tribal cultural icons to emerge out of their conventionally sequestered locations in the village *morung* and/or along the village boundary, animating the exhibitionary value of the monument-monolith assemblage anew, while also reconfiguring their publics along ethnic, religious, and political understandings of identity. That is, the object-event of the cathedral is what makes subsequent mobilizations of Naga cultural icons as part of material articulations of Naga Christianity "banal" – to draw on the work of Elayne Oliphant.[30]

V. The Technology of the Highway

The sheer scale, spread, and location of the monuments on NH 29 make them unlike the historical precedents discussed so far. They share these characteristics with another site constructed just off the highway in Nagaland, the Hornbill Festival. Located approximately 12 kilometers south of Kohima in a rural region accessible via NH 2, the festival ground is a rare instance of a site that seeks to attract visitors in high numbers that is not situated in a Naga town or village. Kajri Jain's idea of automobility is helpful to understand this phenomenon of locating sites of public culture outside major urban or rural centers. Jain identifies "automobility" as a technological condition shaped by India's economic reforms of 1991–1992 that informs this phenomenon, when the influx of global private capital led to a boom in the market for cars and, subsequently, new forms of visual culture along state and national highways.[31] In the case of Nagaland, a post-reform visual culture of connectivity across the rural and the urban appeared after 1997, following a cessation of armed conflict between the Indian Army and armed Naga nationalists. Started in 2000, the Hornbill Festival exemplifies the regional effect of automobility. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the name of the festival site, "Naga Heritage Village", is prominently displayed on a scaffolding high up on the hillside. The signage emulates the famous "Hollywood" sign that sits atop the Santa Monica mountain range in California, which is globally recognized as an iconic instance of the visual culture of automobility [Fig. 11].

As such, the Hornbill Festival constitutes the third and final object-event in the history that informs the monuments on NH 29. Significantly, the technological condition of automobility is still unfolding in Nagaland and Naga-inhabited regions. So, the monuments are part of a wider inventory of sites that have appeared outside prominent urban centers and villages since 2000, including eco-tourism lodges, nature conservation parks, and other retreats. The NH 29 monuments' ties to the visual culture of automobility is most pronounced in the case of Gen. Gwizantsu's monument.

30 Elayne Oliphant, *The Privilege of Being Banal. Art, Secularism, and Catholicism in Paris*, Chicago 2021.

31 Jain, Gods in the Time of Automobility, S22.

[Fig. 11]
Performers and attendees at the 2013 Hornbill Festival, with the signage for Naga Heritage Village in the distant background © Akshaya Tankha.

Constructed on a two-tier terrace, it is designed to allow vehicles to be driven around the pillar on a ramp that loops around it and rejoins the thoroughfare. Moreover, the NH 29 monuments are among the earliest post-ceasefire examples of the way the moment of automobility has been harnessed by Naga actors to contest the state endorsed image of the festive Tribal subject, reproduced in spectacles like the Hornbill Festival.

VI. Territoriality and the Sentience of the Land

The monuments on NH 29 contest the Indian state's practices of enclosure by proclaiming that "their territory is not a part of the Indian Union". Their meaning as symbols of this inscribed claim is continuous with the efficacious aspects of the Naga stone monolith. Adhering to the practice of erecting stone monoliths, they are constructed on land belonging to the kin of the deceased and with stone quarried from specific sites associated with their kin networks. A small inscription on the monument to Gen. Gwizantsu states that it is constructed on land donated by the Seyie clan. According to Rev. Savito Nagi, stone for the monument to Khrisanisa Seyie was quarried from a site in Jotsoma village associated with the deceased's kin ties. Based on the idea that the spirit of the warrior imbues the stone and guards the village from malevolent spirits, the monuments are erected outside the village gate. The cultivated greenery around the built terraces, including the Flower Islet managed by the Western Angami Women's Organization, also resonates with the idea that the spirit of the male warrior enlivens the land to offer respite to weary travelers. Located roughly halfway between the phallic monuments, the garden's management by a women's organization also materializes a gendered division of space, highlighting the predominantly masculinist nature of public space in Nagaland. These spatial features of the monuments demonstrate that they conform to a ritually constituted sense of space and the environment animated by the spirit of the male "warrior" and populated by human and non-human entities in addition to the secular frame of memory associated with the war monument form. As such, the monuments on NH 29 enact a claim to land within the secular terms of territoriality and nationalist identity that is tied to, rather than ruptured from, the ritually constituted Naga conception of the land as sentient.

VII. Conclusion

Driven by multiple organizations with conflicting objectives, the politics of Naga nationalism is far from a site of consensus in contemporary Nagaland and Naga-inhabited regions. This accounts for why many urban elites dismiss the monuments on NH 29 as the vested interests of particular actors. But differences over how best to represent Naga nationalism has not stopped multiple constituencies from mobilizing the form of the memorial monument to

make claims in the name of the cause. For instance, on November 29, 2018, a new stone monument was unveiled in Jotsoma village [Fig. 12]. Perched on a hill, it carries an inscription that states,

> "Leave us Alone To Determine For Ourselves"
> When You Withdraw from Our Naga Country

The monument was erected to celebrate the centenary of the Naga Club, which was founded in 1918 by Naga subjects who had been part of Britain's Labour Corps that served in World War I. Over the years since its inception, the Naga Club became a "political force" that was central to the emergence of the Naga nationalist movement.[32] The statement the monument carries is drawn from a memorandum that the Club submitted in 1929 to the Simon Commission, a statutory body set up by the colonial state to institute partial forms of representative administration in India. Given the political significance of the memorandum in the history of the movement, the new monument echoes the claim to history, territory, and identity enacted by the older ones on NH 29. Similarly, efforts are also currently underway to build a bigger monument to the memory of Zasibituo Nagi in Jotsoma village.

These instances demonstrate that the currency that the monument to Naga nationalism has acquired in post-ceasefire Nagaland cuts across ideological divides. This underscores what I have sought to highlight in this article: that meaning cannot be thought apart from efficacy in grasping its political significance. Their proliferation across state and national highways and varied mobilization by actors across ideological divides signals that their primary significance is aesthetic. It lies in the formal, scalar, and spatial ways that they materialize a monumental form that constantly slips across the war monument and stone monolith forms. This slippage across these discursively opposed domains of practice highlights the plural temporality of the monument to Naga nationalism, which simultaneously participates in the time of memorialization associated with the stone monolith and the war monument. Relatedly, the formal, scalar, and spatial ties of the Naga monument to object-events across the mid to late twentieth century showcases its layered temporality. It is the oscillation between their exhibitionary and ritual qualities rather than either/or which lends the monumental assemblage its identitarian purchase today. Viewed another way, the ritually constituted values of the contemporary Naga monument lend new political force or efficacy to their performance as claims to land within the secular terms of territoriality, history, heritage, and identity.

However, Naga actors are not alone in making claims to land in monumental forms. In February 2020, the Assam Rifles Regiment of the Indian Army unveiled "Veer Smriti" or the "Heroes' Memo-

32 Marcus Franke, *War and Nationalism in South Asia. The Indian State and the Nagas*, Abingdon/New York 2012, 60.

[Fig. 12]
The Naga Club Centenary monument, 2018, stone and mixed media, approx. 915 × 152 × 31 cm, Jotsoma, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

[Fig. 13]
Veer Smriti, 2020, granite, approx. 1220 × 305 × 150 cm, Mokokchung, Nagaland © Akshaya Tankha.

rial" on land it controls in Mokokchung town [Fig. 13]. According to Arunabh Saikia, the memorial was erected "to honour the lives of 357 personnel who had been killed in counter-insurgency operations in Nagaland".[33] Saikia notes that Nagas received the news of the monument's unveiling with opposition. They viewed it as a calculated insult to the Naga nationalist struggle and Naga activists' efforts to seek justice for the human rights abuses they have accused the Indian Army of committing since the 1950s.[34] This disregard for regional sentiment is echoed in the design adopted for the monument commissioned by the Assam Rifles Regiment. Veer Smriti reproduces many elements associated with the Naga stone monolith inside the Kohima War Cemetery. Although the column constructed in Mokokchung is distinct in material and design, the built space of the site appropriates the circular design of the base and the semi-circular wall that frames the monument inside the cemetery. Like its counterpart inside the cemetery, the wall behind Veer Smriti is inscribed with the names of Indian Army personnel who died in counter-insurgency operations in Nagaland. Additionally, the entrance to the gated site in Mokokchung is inscribed with the same quote that the monolith inside the cemetery carries [see Fig. 7], albeit to pay homage to members of the Indian Army and assert India's territorial sovereignty over Nagaland.

A brief glimpse into the new monuments to Naga nationalism being erected in Nagaland demonstrate that the monolith-monument assemblage is not isolated to two examples on NH 29. Rather, the highway monuments are part of an expanding visual terrain shaped by a broader sensible field of ritual and secular forms of memorialization and public remembrance. Collectively, they highlight the ever-changing lived realities of regional Indigenous life-worlds and ways of belonging to land, including as territory. On the other hand, the formal, scalar, and spatial characteristics of Veer Smriti show that the Indian state's marginalization of Tribal/Adivasi struggles through a longstanding practice of dispossession via appropriation remains ongoing. The construction of Veer Smriti also indicates that their disavowal of Indigeneity has now acquired a new aesthetic register that signals a veritable contestation via public forms of memorialization and commemoration. In the face of it, the contemporary monument to Naga nationalism enacts an aesthetics of endurance and emergence that not only militates against essentialist and historicist understandings of Naga Indigeneity but also exemplifies an aesthetics of Indigenous presence amidst its experience of dispossession by the state in postcolonial South Asia.

33
Arunabh Saikia, 'They are saying they defeated us': In Nagaland, a war memorial for Indian soldiers faces backlash, in: *Scroll.in*, February 14, 2020 (May 20, 2022).

34
Luingam Luithui and Nandita Haksar, *Nagaland File. A Question of Human Rights*, New Delhi 1984.

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“NOT THE END”

ARTISTS ON AND AGAINST NUCLEAR CLOSURE

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ABSTRACT

Casualties of nuclear technologies are not immediate, and the populations that bear the most significant burden are too sparse to be noteworthy, especially in the case of uranium mining industries. Shaped by forms of settler colonialism – the US and Canada mine on Indigenous and First Nation reservations – effects of radioactive exposure produce slow, recursive forms of nuclear suffering as illness may take up to thirty years to manifest. This article zooms in on the case of uranium mining and the violence of the temporal lag between uranium exposure and the appearance of symptoms. It explores how this lag is critically interrogated by two contemporary artists that approach uranium mining histories as unresolved; as a series of situations whose unfolding goes on, thus going against the closure of narratives of uranium mining. Two artworks that critically engage with the slow temporality of uranium and its violent effects, and that this paper closely reads, are Bonnie Devine's drawing series *The Book of Radiance* (1999) and video *Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River* and Eve Andrée Laramée's installation *Halfway to Invisible* (2009). Both artists lay bare the temporal possibilities of turning our gaze away from obvious nuclear symbols, such as bombs and reactors, or what technology historian Gabrielle Hecht calls our *fetishes* of nuclear histories (*Being Nuclear. Africans and the Global Uranium Trade*), to rather engage with less obvious nuclear histories. Drawing on theoretical insights from recent scholarship in science and technology studies and art history around time, the paper emphasizes the affordances of contemporary art in redressing uranium mining as a slow and latent modality of the nuclear complex.

KEYWORDS

Nuclear extractivism; Science and technology; Slowness; Non-closure; Contemporary art.

Our fetishes keep us close to bombs and reactors and far from other places
where nuclearity gets made and unmade.
Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear*

What exactly is nuclearity, and who gets to define it? Where is nuclearity? Most importantly, what is the temporality of nuclearity, its duration? If nuclearity is the set of characteristics that make something nuclear – the geographical, historical, and sociopolitical parameters that qualify an activity, say an explosion, as of the nuclear order – then an atomic bomb or a nuclear reactor is almost universally considered nuclear. Science and technology historian Gabrielle Hecht,[1] who coined the term, proposes "nuclearity" in contrast to "radiation", highlighting how the physical presence of radiation does not always lead to the official designation of an operation as nuclear.[2] Uranium – the most important mineral for both military and civil nuclear energy, obtained through mining – is a prime example, as it was turned into a banal commodity through the transformation of the raw ore into yellowcake, subsequently traded internationally. Indeed, scientific narratives around uranium have succeeded in enabling the substance to largely bypass legal regulatory frameworks. As a result, both uranium mining histories and uranium's toxic effects have been obfuscated. A key factor in that process of obfuscation is the specific temporality of uranium: symptoms from exposure to the substance only become visible years later, complicating any connection between cause and effect. Uranium's toxicity, as a form of harm that is not spectacular, has thus received meager historical and mediatic attention; which in turn has allowed it to persist over time.[3]

In what follows, I explore how the violence of this temporal lag between toxic exposure and the appearance of symptoms is critically interrogated by two contemporary artists that approach uranium mining histories as unresolved; as a series of situations whose unfolding goes on. The violence done by the labor of uranium mining has not gone unnoticed by artists for some time now, in different geographical contexts and historical moments.[4] Bonnie Devine's

1
The colonial histories of mining, and especially of uranium mining and its relation to the wider nuclear culture of the Cold War, have until recently received scant scholarly attention in comparison to the libraries that have been written on almost all other aspects of the nuclear; Gabrielle Hecht's work has been significant for that shift in focus of nuclear histories.

2
Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear. Africans and the Global Uranium Trade*, Cambridge, MA 2012, 15.

3
Scholars have shown a similar dynamic for other forms of toxic chemicals, across various geographical contexts.

4
I offer an attempt to historicize artistic engagements with uranium mining in Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou, Irrésolutions nucléaires. L'art contemporain à l'aune de la 'nucléarité', in: *Les cahiers du musée national d'art moderne* 160, 2022, 77–89. For a similar approach in the

drawing series *The Book of Radiance* (1999) and video *Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River* and Eve Andrée Laramée's installation *Halfway to Invisible* (2009) directly respond to the slowness associated with the effects of uranium mining and its lingering, violent traces. Both artworks lay bare the temporal affordances of turning our gaze away from obvious nuclear symbols, or what Hecht calls our *fetishes* in the passage that opens the present essay, to rather engage with less obvious nuclear histories. Drawing on Hecht's conceptualization of the temporality of nuclearity, ultimately, I suggest that Devine's and Laramée's works put forward irresolution and non-closure as productive temporal modes to accommodate the slowness of uranium's toxicity. Before moving onto my understanding of slowness in relation to (nuclear) toxicity and contemporary art, I will unpack Hecht's emphasis on the role of time in the uneven distribution of nuclear toxicity.

Uranium mining has consistently been organized along racial lines, as it is colonial powers who mined on colonized and formerly colonized territories while employing communities in the mines: France in Niger; Russia in Kazakhstan; the United States, Canada, and Australia in Indigenous, First Nations, and Aboriginal lands. Unevenly distributed and shaped by factors of race and class, the environmental and health effects of uranium mining have thus also been unevenly felt. Hecht's work has underlined the importance of understanding the uneven geographical distribution of uranium extraction without, however, leaving behind its uneven temporal distribution. The *when* of nuclearity matters as well. Literary scholar Jessica Hurley has similarly argued for a temporal understanding of the violence of the nuclear age, locating the latter in the temporality of the infrastructural everyday as the site of nuclear apocalypse – from urban locations of civil defense, like atomic shelters, to uranium extractive sites.[5]

Focusing on intimate manifestations of nuclear violence, I follow Hecht's insight that the slow unfolding of lung disease among uranium miners has been essential to the undisrupted continuation of mining operations for the nuclear industry. Exposure to radon, the radioactive gas produced by uranium ores in the mines, takes ten to thirty years to instigate disease. "That's a long time to track people in a scientific study. It's also enough of a lag to generate doubt about the link between exposure and illness."[6] This temporal ellipsis between exposure and symptoms became itself an actor that obstructed the effect of uranium on the body; it became difficult to study workers and has thus produced harmful delays in setting standards and creating regulations to keep them safe.

field of literature, see the compelling work of literary scholar Jessica Hurley, especially her monograph *Infrastructures of Apocalypse. American Literature and the Nuclear Complex*, Minneapolis 2020.

5
Hurley, Infrastructures of Apocalypse, 9.

6
Hecht, Being Nuclear, 42.

Despite the centrality of uranium mining in the nuclear project it has been absent from political, academic, and cultural imaginings of the atomic age. In large part this is due to the inaccessibility and/or disorder of archives, especially since the latter have floated in an ambiguous status in between the public domain and private institutions.[7] Hecht's own difficulties accessing archives are repeatedly accounted for in her research, and the same goes for other recent scholarship on the topic.[8] Social imaginings of the atomic age have likewise generally centered on the immediate disruption symbolized by atomic explosions at the expense of their longer aftermath or underpinning mining activities, as has been argued by different scholars recently. Identifying this absence or lack, contemporary artists have become critically engaged with the issue, initiating a starting point for dialogue. Artistic imaginings of the atomic age, or at least *certain* artistic imaginings, have decidedly contributed to the decentering of the primal event the bomb embodies, focusing instead on the more mundane aspects of life in a nuclearized world. Indeed, one might argue that it is in great part *due* to inaccessibility and lack of archiving that artists have engaged with the topic. Drawing on theoretical insights from recent scholarship in science and technology studies and art history around time, the paper emphasizes the affordances of contemporary art in redressing uranium mining as a slow and latent modality of the nuclear complex.

Considering the delayed and discreet pace of the manifestation of uranium's toxicity emerges from an understanding of time as open-ended on both a material and a semiotic level. This framework very much draws on scholarship around "slowness" and related temporal notions as they have become keywords in the humanities in recent years. My approach builds on recent points of contact from two fields that rarely get to meet – art history and science and technology studies (STS) – which have, certainly in different ways, both engaged with notions of temporal openness and non-closure. Recent scholarship in STS has been concerned with the slow and open-ended temporality of the toxic, highlighting the inherent uncertainty brought about by the slowness, if not endlessness, of the lag between exposure to toxicity of chemicals and symptoms experienced in the body. The list is long, but suffice it for now to cite the important work of Michelle Murphy on toxic latency, as "the wait between chemical exposure and symptom. To be latent is to be dormant, a potential not yet manifest". Chloe Ahmann's

[7] For instance, environmental and health reports and photographic documentation of mining activities and infrastructures were, and still are in some cases, held by the mining companies. This means they fall under the purview of the private domain and access is not always guaranteed.

[8] Along with Hecht, communication scholar Peter C. van Wyck, who has written about uranium mining in Canada, recounts his own experiences in which permissions to access materials in the Canadian National Archives were not granted. Peter C. van Wyck, *The Highway of the Atom*, Montreal 2010.

"meantime" as an important temporal aspect of living with the slow violence of incremental pollution in which she stresses the intermittent aspect of one's experience of toxicity. Ruby de Vos's recent work on the "toxic meanwhile" as a temporal framework allows for a temporary bracketing of toxicity whether on a collective sociopolitical or personal mental level, and which is largely supported by toxicity's invisible nature.[9] What unites such readings, in their divergences, is the underlying assumption of the temporal violence inherent in contemporary experiences of toxicity, whether nuclear or otherwise.

In art history and media studies, art historian Christine Ross and cinema and media arts scholar Lutz Koepnick have discussed slowness through media and technological experimentation. Ross unsettles the linearity of both historical and art historical narratives, as well as their seemingly immaculate conclusions on what they document. Operating in what she calls the temporal turn in contemporary art, she undertakes a comprehensive study tracking repetition, slowness, and open-endedness in contemporary moving-image practices engaged with historiography. Interminability, endless loops, lack of narrative resolution, slow motion, and slow dissolves are some of the modes contemporary artists are employing to put off the closing of the modern past as "past".[10] Koepnick situates himself against discourses of slowness that probe nostalgic or escapist longings for a preindustrial past that have proliferated in the last years. He rather defines a different ethos of slowness that animates contemporary lens-based and multimedia practices, notably through technological experimentation, especially slow-motion photography. Yet, interestingly enough, the slowness Koepnick theorizes is not in opposition to speed or acceleration. Rather than orienting viewers to the "presumed pleasures of a preindustrial past", he casts slowness as an artistic strategy that invites us to "gaze firmly at and into the present's velocity and temporal compression".[11]

While I am indebted to all these bodies of work that suggest slowness as an effective strategy to experience the present's intensification, my focus in this essay are experiences of slowness that exist under an industrialized present not in opposition to but rather

9
Michelle Murphy, Chemical Infrastructures of the St Clair River, in: Soraya Boudia and Natalie Jas (eds.), *Toxicants, Health and Regulation since 1945*, Abingdon/New York 2015, 103–115; Ruby de Vos, *Living with Toxicity. Disruptive Temporalities in Art and Culture*, PhD diss., University of Groningen, 2021; Chloe Ahmann, 'It's Exhausting to Create an Event Out of Nothing'. Slow Violence and the Manipulation of Time, in: *Cultural Anthropology* 33/1, 2018, 142–171. It's important to note that Rob Nixon's "slow violence", "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space", to which a lot of this work is indebted, has become a keyword across the environmental humanities. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, MA 2011, 3.

10
Christine Ross, *The Past Is the Present; It's the Future Too. The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art*, London 2012, 287.

11
Lutz Koepnick, *On Slowness. Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*, New York 2014, 72.

as a co-constitutive part of its operatory model. Pointedly, anthropologist of science Joseph Masco has defined such forms of slowness, between environmental events and the recognition of their long-term repercussions as "the major psychosocial achievement of the industrial age".[12] Seen through this prism, an analysis of the violently slow pace of the bodily manifestation of nuclearity requires careful consideration of its material workings. If slowness is by definition always relegated to the background, then we need to attune to its details and its material specificities. In order to think about the material slowness of nuclear exposure, I move through the theoretical insights offered by recent art historical discourses on time and temporality, layering them with the necessary material considerations on time offered by the work of contemporary STS scholars on toxic exposure. Taking a cue from Ross's "plea to go with irresolution" – an invitation to think against the closure of historical narrative – I want to probe what such an endeavor, to remain in the unsolvable, might look like if explored through the material endurance of radiation.[13] What for Devine and Laramée becomes a striving against the closure of histories of uranium mining, even when mining activities have resumed.

I. Unfinished Business: Bonnie Devine

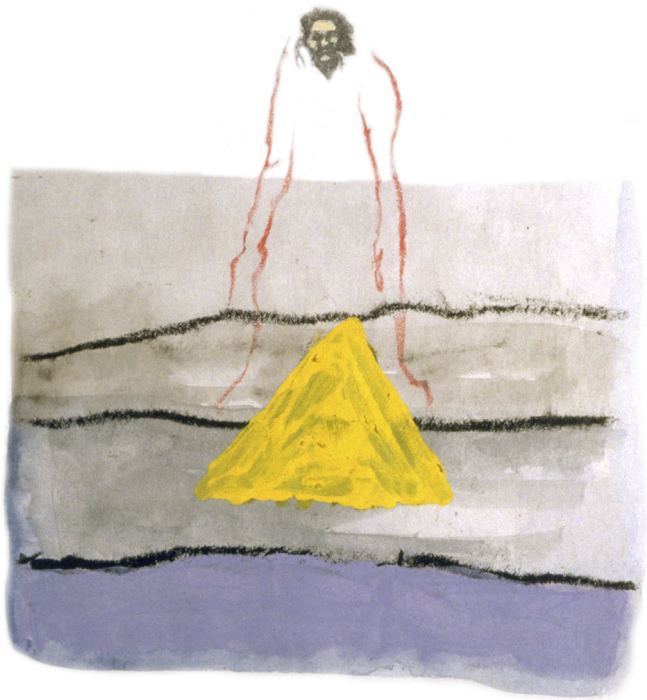
In 1999, Bonnie Devine (b. 1952), an Anishinaabe/Ojibwe artist, made a series of drawings reflecting on the history of uranium mining in the Serpent River First Nation. The exploitation of the land started in 1953, with the discovery of uranium ores, and supposedly ended in 1996, when extractive activities ceased. Yet after the closure of the mines, nearly two hundred million tons of radioactive mill tailings continued to contaminate the Serpent River watershed, causing massive but mostly undocumented deaths of plant, animal, and human life. Part of a trilogy around the discovery of uranium mining on the Canadian shield,[14] this series of drawings is called *The Book of Radiance* [Fig. 1, Fig. 2 and Fig. 3]. It shows, with disarming candor, the natural surroundings where the Serpent River First Nation lives. Underneath each drawing, made with watercolor and tar, a small caption ascribes a narrative edge to the image, reminiscent of the genre of a visual essay. Most of the captions are enigmatic, however, throwing suspicion on what it is we are looking

12
Joseph Masco, The Age of Fallout, in: *History of the Present* 5/2, 2015, 137–168, here 153.

13
Here Ross discusses the film installation *Klatssasin* (2007) by Stan Douglas. This recombinant work is essentially nonlinear; it defies the limitations of a traditional film format by having no real beginning or end. Referencing Akira Kurosawa's legendary film *Rashomon* (1950), in which a plot is described in several contradictory ways, in *Klatsassin* a murder unfolds through flashbacks, time shifts, ambiguous cuts, and multiple perspectives.

14
The Book of Radiance and *The Book of Transformation* constitute parts one and two of a trilogy; the third part of the trilogy is called *The Book of Radiation*.

[Fig. 1]
Bonnie Devine, Book of Transformation, 1999, drawing, mixed media, paper, 8.5 × 11 in.



[Fig. 2]
Bonnie Devine, Book of Transformation, 1999, drawing, mixed media, paper, 8.5 × 11 in.

[Fig. 3]
Bonnie Devine, Book of Transformation, 1999, drawing, mixed media, paper, 8.5 × 11 in.

at. Amid the trees, forests, waterways, and Manitous,[15] a recurring element disturbs the apparent purity: a stark, yellow, hilly triangle. Part of the quasi-totality of the drawings, it recalls the fluorescent gleam of yellowcake, an artificially refined uranium ore that is often used as an intermediate step in the production of nuclear weapons. The powdery radiant matter is a structural element, at once of the drawing and of the landscape, but its ubiquity is not limited to the natural surroundings. One of the drawings poetically evokes the continuity between territory and body through a faint layering of a map over a human figure. Drawn on a yellow background, the caption simply reads: "poisoned". This radiance, in Devine's world, refers not only to radiation but also to the radiant light of a prophetic vision. This foreseeing acquires its full potential in a further iteration of the drawings, where Devine opted for a different artistic medium and subsequently developed a fully fledged narrative that unlocks the enigmatic coupling of image and caption in *The Book of Radiance*.

In collaboration with artist Rebecca Garrett, Devine switched from the static medium of drawing to the fluid medium of moving images with the video *Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River* (2002) [Fig. 4 and Fig. 5].[16] While the drawings pass in front of our eyes at a slow pace, we hear members of the community, notably the artist's uncle, narrating Anishinaabe environmental knowledge and how it endures, but also foresees the nuclear industry's catastrophic forces. The Saulteaux First Nations Canadian curator, artist, and writer, Robert Houle has underscored the centrality of oral traditions for the Anishinaabe and frames Devine's practice within conceptual and cultural inheritances.[17] The infamous clicking of a Geiger counter resonates in the background as a nonvisual reminder of the persistence of radiation. The sonic stability of the Geiger counter enters into sharp contrast with the multilayered temporalities evoked in the voice-over.

As different stories and chants converge in the voices of the narrators, the past, present, and future of the Serpent River First

15
Among certain Amerindian peoples, the Manitou is a supernatural power embodied in foreign persons or mysterious and unusual objects. Devine considers "uranium as an animate being, an arcane life form, not yet accounted for by present day biology or physics, in that it possesses qualities of self-generation and evolutionary development. I believe this is what the ancient ones, the Anishinaabek, would call a Manitou." Bonnie Devine, correspondence with the author, April 8, 2022.

16
The choice of artistic medium here is important, yet we shouldn't overlook the drawings too quickly as "static". In an essay on Devine, Robert Houle inscribes the artist in a longer lineage of drawing, notably in connection to the work of another Ojibwe artist, Norval Morrisseau (1932–2007), founder of the Woodland School. Houle traces a connection between Morrisseau and the Grand Medicine Society's use of pictography as a mnemonic device. Robert Houle, Dibaajimowin / Storytelling, in: Bonnie Devine, Tom Hill, Robert Houle, and Diane Purgen, *Stories from the Shield. Bonnie Devine*, Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford, ON 2004, 18–28, here 21, 22. Some serigraphs by Morrisseau are indeed close to Devine's work in terms of their form, as for instance in the color composition in *Nature's Balance* (1976).

17
Ibid.

[Fig. 4]
Bonnie Devine, Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River, 2002, video stills, Betacam, 32 min., 16:34 © Vtape and the artist.

[Fig. 5]
Bonnie Devine, Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River, 2002, video stills, Betacam, 32 min., 12:12 © Vtape and the artist.

Nation come together in the nuclearized landscape. The voices are composed, the pace of the video is steady. Yet the narration is not linear; it has no clear beginning or end. In contrast to the drawing series, the extractive violence performed on the landscape becomes ever clearer as Devine introduces the vision of her uncle, Art Meawasige, in which he describes having seen a yellow powder a few years prior to the geological discovery of the uranium ores. The nonlinearity of the narrative muddles past and future temporalities, bringing us back to a time when the landscape was untouched by such pollution and to a time, also, when people didn't *have* to reckon with it. In providing access to a prenuclear past in Anishinaabe cosmology, the work figures how nuclearity weaves into familiar idioms for Devine, only by disrupting them and changing the course of history. In other words, it figures how nuclearity has the power to disrupt the order of (certain) worlds – to take up Hecht's lines that open this article – and how this disruption, in its intermingling with traditional Indigenous knowledge, also occurs through the specific temporality of radiation.[18]

As Masco has noted, "The first thing that nuclear technologies explode are experiences of time by simultaneously enabling both the absolute end of time and the exponential proliferation of a toxic future."[19] This endlessly producing toxic future is translated in Devine's work through the absence of narrative linearity, which takes a particularly decisive turn toward the end of the video. The piece ends abruptly, without offering any sense of closure or resolution. In lieu of the traditional "The End" in cinematographic and video works, Devine concludes with a bold "NOT THE END". This open-ended ending demands to be fathomed in its full potential.

Devine, in an almost manifesto gesture, opts to "go with irresolution" (to follow Ross) and *not* ascribe a clear endpoint in the history of uranium in the territory of Serpent River First Nation. Against a framework in which the closing of the mine in 1996 would signify the end of harms associated with mining, she posits the temporal openness of this story because, quite simply, Serpent River is still contaminated territory, and the Anishinaabe people still suffer from the symptoms of radiation-induced illness. *Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River* shows us that despite the material slowness through which radiation becomes palpable as illness, the radioactive mill tailings will be actively harmful for longer than the material's half-life. And it is this material lingering endurance of radioactive toxicity that demands creative frameworks able to accommodate its constantly evolving temporal workings.

18
This connects to some extent, although unrelated to nuclear histories, with Mark Rifkin's insightful conceptualization of temporal multiplicity and Indigenous sovereignty beyond conventional settler-colonial binaries. See: Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time. Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, Durham, NC/London 2017.

19
Joseph Masco, *The Nuclear Borderlands. The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War Mexico*, Princeton, NJ 2006, 12.

[Fig. 6]
Bonnie Devine, Reclamation Project, 1995, Lynde Shores Conservation Area, Whitby, Ontario, photograph by the artist © The artist.

The malleability of time informs Devine's broader oeuvre. In her earlier land art installation *Reclamation Project* (1995) [Fig. 6], she deployed her work in various locations throughout southern Ontario. Adhering to the artist's hallmark simplicity, this site-specific piece was a simple stretch of turf laid onto different spots for, as she put it, just the time necessary to take a picture.[20] This ephemeral installation – that is, the antipode of slowness – was a direct comment on the killing of an Anishinaabe protester, Dudley George, during a police action against Camp Ipperwash in September 1995. At first sight, *Reclamation Project* might appear straightforwardly concerned with space. It is about, after all, possessing space: through violence, in the case of enduring settlement of present-day Ontario, or through activism, via the temporary occupation of the land against territorial expropriation that followed World War II.

As anthropologist Patrick Wolfe pointedly noted, "Whatever settlers may say – and they generally have a lot to say – the primary motive for genocide is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory."[21] The potential resources or broader settler projects gained through access are precisely targeted by the ephemerality of Devine's gesture in *Reclamation Project*. Just like in *Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River*, possessing land might be the primary act of settler colonialism, but it is importantly also a form of temporal possession. And indeed, it is the undisrupted continuity and endurance of settler land possession, and the longevity of its toxic material aftermaths that these pieces are subtly targeting. The open-ended conclusion of *Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River* precisely points to the endlessness of any attempt to address forms of nuclear-colonial toxicity; it can only be an ongoing battle, unfinished business much like the endless and ongoing processes of decolonization. In short, *Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River* dismisses any presumption that nuclearity is behind us and stages interminability as a political imperative.

II. Uranium, Activism, and the Temporal Logic of (Un)spectacular Accidents

Devine's video and drawings should be understood as products of their time: the 1980s and 1990s were a moment when uranium mining became a central stake in the global Indigenous rights movement. Before turning to Laramée and the temporalities of uranium mining in New Mexico, it is worth taking a look at certain moments and people of the global anti-uranium movement, as they illuminate

20
I am deriving this, as well as the following information on the work, from the reading of *Reclamation Project* offered in James Nisbet, *Second Site*, Princeton, NJ 2020, 41–42.

21
Patrick Wolfe, Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native, in: *Journal of Genocide Research* 8/4, 2006, 387–409.

the temporal logics of what constitutes a nuclear accident in the first place.

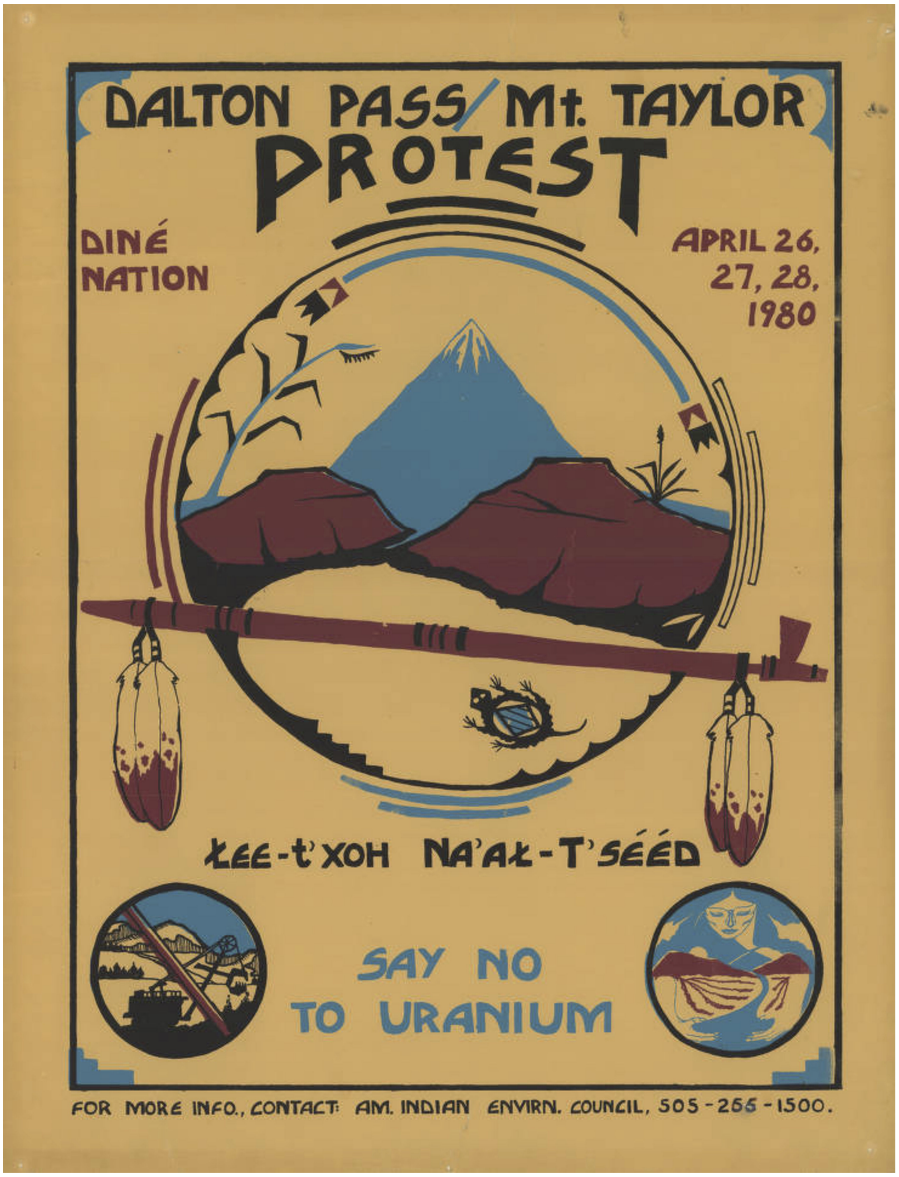
A turning point in the movement against uranium was the 1992 World Uranium Hearing, an international conference, the first of its kind, that took place in Salzburg and gathered speakers from all continents, including Indigenous activists and scientists who testified to the health and environmental problems of uranium mining. But starting in the 1970s, the work of people like Winona LaDuke, member of the Ojibwe tribe and longtime Native American rights activist, had already been crucial in opening a transnational dialogue on the effects of uranium mining. LaDuke visited the uranium mines in Elliot Lake, Ontario, in the 1980s, contributing to the establishment of a transnational dialogue across Canada and the United States in Indigenous struggles against uranium.[22] In the mid-1980s, LaDuke also coauthored a particularly informative essay openly connecting colonial land dispossession and nuclear operations on Native lands, under the umbrella term, "radioactive colonialism".[23] Remarkably, uranium mining operations were covering much bigger parts of land than other resource extraction activities (for instance low-sulfur coal and reserves of oil and natural gas) in all of the western United States, more than one half of *all* US uranium deposits laying under reservations. On a map illustrating the bigger picture of the toxic soup generated by resource extraction on Native lands illustrating the article, uranium's broad territorial sweep distinctly stands out. To think with Wolfe again, there could not have been uranium mining without access to territory, and it is the opposition to this continuous occupation that informed the lexicon and imagery of the global Indigenous anti-uranium movement [Fig. 7].

Although Hecht has noted that activist mobilization against uranium mining remained on the fringes of mainstream anti-nuclear action,[24] people like LaDuke subtly connected the two as they maintained ties with different political formations. For example, appearing on a radio show produced by Los Angeles performance group Sisters of Survival (SOS) in 1980, LaDuke stated her support and action for the feminist movement against the atomic bomb, which back then was very much tied to the anti-nuclear missile mobilizations taking place in Europe – a movement then clearly

22
A trace of these visits can be seen in Magnus Isaacson's political documentary *Uranium* (1990), where one can see scenes of LaDuke conversing with the local population about the effects of the mining industry and sometimes, interestingly, referring to the factor of time as an insurmountable obstacle for Indigenous anti-nuclear struggles.

23
Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke, Native America. The Political Economy of Radioactive Colonialism, in: *Insurgent Sociologist* 13/3, 1986, 51–78.

24
Hecht, Being Nuclear, 289. She makes this case for movements in Canada and the United States, but sets the Australian case apart.



[Fig. 7]
Poster from protest against the uranium industry on Navajo land on April, 26, 27 and 28, 1980 © Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

removed from Indigenous struggles against uranium extraction.[25] Although the focus of the radio show was on nuclear disarmament as a critical stake for women's political organizing, LaDuke's broader activist practice exemplified her far-encompassing anti-nuclear ethos, which did not set the two struggles apart. Paying attention to such activist works today is crucial, especially for their political formulations of which kinds of nuclear events make the headlines and which do not.

In her essay on radioactive colonialism, LaDuke refers to an "enormous accident" that occurred in July 1979 in Church Rock, New Mexico, at the United Nuclear uranium mill.[26] The adjacent mill tailings dam collapsed, releasing more than one hundred million gallons of highly radioactive water into the Rio Puerco. The crack should have been anticipated, since "band aid" fixes had unsuccessfully attempted to fix smaller cracks in the dam in the months leading up to the accident. The impact was immediate: primary water sources for Navajo people were contaminated, and innumerable wild animals and livestock ingested radioactive water and died. The Southwest Research and Information Center deemed the spill the "uranium industry's Three Mile Island".[27] But in fact the Church Rock spill was more severe than Three Mile Island, which in nuclear histories is considered the first substantial civil accident, an eerie premonition of what was to come in 1986 with the Chernobyl disaster.

Yet the Church Rock spill remains an under-documented and poorly mediatized occurrence. Historian Traci Brynne Voyles has convincingly shown how inadequately, and at times unprofessionally, the spill was covered, for instance with mistakes in place names in media outlets outside of New Mexico.[28] Another key factor in its media coverage was the lethargic time frame of the event's dissemination. Notably, the Environmental Protection Agency's tardy recognition of the mining company's responsibility contributed to information on Church Rock being slowly produced and distributed. To this day, the spill figures marginally, if at all, in lists of major nuclear accidents. LaDuke's lexicon of an "enormous disaster", then, is important, as it firmly places Church Rock on the global podium of nuclear accidents. This choice of words is also important since Church Rock did not yield any spectacular pictures, making its visual archive anemic, too. It is the rhythm of knowledge produc-

25
Helene Rosenbluth, *You Can't Kill the Spirit. Women and the Anti-Nuclear Movement*, Los Angeles: End of Rainbow Productions, 1983, 30 min. The author accessed the audio file in the archive of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

26
Churchill and LaDuke, Native America, 86.

27
Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding. Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country*, Minneapolis 2015, 168.

28
Ibid., 167.

tion around nuclear exposure and the glacially paced recognition of myriad undocumented uranium mining accidents in New Mexico that underpins the artistic practice of US artist Eve Andrée Laramée (b. 1956).

III. Epistemic Slowness: Eve Andrée Laramée

Laramée often begins her interviews by citing the Church Rock accident. Her practice of the past twenty years is linked to a specific political and historical context – namely the New Mexico region, and more generally the desert Southwest of the United States, which is linked to the nuclear age on multiple planes. Where Devine figures the effects of the atom at the level of the ecosystem and the cosmos, Laramée zooms in on the body and the cell, prompting an examination of Masco's invitation "to examine the effects of the bomb not only at the level of the nation-state but also at the level of the local ecosystem, the organism, and, ultimately, the cell".[29] In 2009 she created an installation entitled *Halfway to Invisible* that traced the history of uranium mining in the Four Corners region to the microscopic level, examining the cellular mutations of people who worked for, or were affected by, the presence of the mining industry [Fig. 8 and Fig. 9]. The title refers both to the invisibility of radioactivity and to the half-life of radioactive materials. The work was commissioned by the Center for Disease Control at Emory University and shown at the, now defunct, university gallery on the occasion of the bicentennial of Charles Darwin's birth, which in part explains its specific focus on biological evolution.

The artist has described the installation as a tool to visualize information "in a non-linear time-based mode".[30] First and foremost, the sense of nonlinearity was curated through interlacing a motley array of elements. The video component, *Evolution/Mutation*,[31] was a montage of images drawn from geology and biology that faded into each other at a quick pace. Aesthetically recalling the psychedelic color palette, vividly abstract reds, purples, and greens disintegrated into one another. What these images represented were scalar juxtapositions: on the one hand, cancerous cells mutating because of contact with radon, and on the other, close-ups of geological formations such as volcanos and the thermal springs of

29
Joseph Masco, Mutant Ecologies. Radioactive Life in Post-Cold War New Mexico, in: *Cultural Anthropology* 19/4, 2004, 517–550, here 521.

30
Eve Andrée Laramée, Tracking Our Atomic Legacy. Now We Are All Sons of Bitches, in: *WEAD. Woman Eco Artists Dialog* 5, 2012 (June 2, 2022).

31
A full version of the video is available online at http://vimeo.com/64467515 (June 2, 2022).

[Fig. 8]
Eve Andrée Laramée, Halfway to Invisible, 2009, installation view, motion-activated stainless steel laboratory cages, light boxes with images and text, video projection, video sculpture, photographs, archive of documents, at the Emory University Gallery (now defunct)

[Fig. 9]
Eve Andrée Laramée, Halfway to Invisible, 2009, installation view, motion-activated stainless steel laboratory cages, light boxes with images and text, video projection, video sculpture, photographs, archive of documents, at the Emory University Gallery (now defunct)

Yellowstone National Park, where extremophiles abide.[32] The visual similarities between the two were striking. Next to the video, a metallic kinetic sculpture was activated upon the visitor's approach. Reminiscent of animal cages in laboratory settings, it could be interpreted as a direct reference to the intense culture of animal testing in nuclear weapons laboratories.[33] To the side, a modest laboratory bench exhibited a variety of scientific scholarship and imagery on uranium mining, a Geiger counter, and a photograph of a portable radon gas detection kit. Around the gallery, no less than sixty little lightboxes containing images of genome maps adorned the walls, yet the lighting was dim, and visitors struggled to read precisely what they depicted. Upon closer inspection, one started to notice words overlaid on the scientific images, among them "doubt", "indefinite", "liable", "expose", and "protect". The aesthetic lexicon of the installation pointed to uncertainty as a key condition engineering epistemic slowness – the trick of intentionally producing scientific knowledge around the biological dangers of radiation exposure *slowly*, so as to facilitate uninterrupted and unregulated mining activities.

Challenging prevailing notions of scientific authority, the installation conveyed the sense that these different sites where science is mediated – images, papers, allusions to the laboratory setting – are not to be taken at face value. Rather, the arrangement of all these components suggested that gaining access to scientific knowledge around the effects of toxic exposure cannot be unmediated. Uncertainty saturated the space. This uncertainty was not accidental but mirrored that of the scientific community itself, especially in the initial years of the uranium boom in the early 1950s in the Four Corners region [Fig. 10]. The uncertainty that plagued studies of occupational disease linked to radon and radiation produced "delays in setting standards, in creating regulations, in testing", just as it lowered operating costs and upped profits.[34] Uncertainty, and the epistemic slowness it generated, was instrumentalized by the industry. The immediate and future-oriented time span of industrial progress reigned over the long-term uncertainties of exposure. The installation orchestrated yet another temporal friction: whereas the worth attributed to the land by Indigenous epistemologies derives from centuries of "historical, religious and geographical meaning", its industrial worth treats the land as instantly

32
Extremophiles are resilient microorganisms that can survive in extreme environments, for example in very high temperatures. They may also be radiation resistant and can even proliferate in the effluent from nuclear reactors. Currently, research is being conducted to assess whether extremophiles could be used in the cleanup of contaminated sites.

33
The cages are referred to as "animal cages" in the exhibition checklist. For more on how experiments on human and nonhuman bodies helped produce a substantive body of knowledge about the bomb, see Hugh Gusterson, *Nuclear Rites. A Weapons Laboratory at the End of the Cold War*, Berkeley, CA/Los Angeles/London 1996, esp. chapter 5, Bodies and Machines, 101–130.

34
Hecht, Being Nuclear, 42, 204.

[Fig. 10]
Image part of the image archive, in: Eve Andrée Laramée, Halfway to Invisible, 2009, signs point the way to different mine sites in the Ambrosia Lake uranium district, date unknown

pollutable.[35] Self-legitimizing access to territory of settlers, recalling Devine, contrasts with longer-standing relations to land. In fact, the devaluation of longer temporalities was inherent to the nuclear project at large.[36] By exposing these conflicting, and ultimately irreconcilable, temporal registers, *Halfway to Invisible* staged the inherent tensions between the time spans of profit-seeking prospectors, of lives spent in the mines, and of centuries of Indigenous land epistemologies.

The way the installation staged uncertainty was in continuity with Laramée's previous work and its challenging of the hegemonic nature of scientific knowledge. *Apparatus for the Distillation of Vague Intuitions* (1994), for example, is a vast glass sculptural installation simulating a chemical, or rather alchemical, laboratory [Fig. 11]. An intricate interweaving of glass vessels, tubes, and wires, it has no seeming structural logic, reminiscent of the nonlinearity the artist would implement fifteen years later in *Halfway to Invisible*. Upon closer inspection of the work, one realizes that the glass is handblown and thus does not conform to standards of scientific instruments (in fact, the glass was salvaged leftovers from Los Alamos National Laboratory); below the table lie upended jars, spilled liquids, and rotting leaves. On some glass surfaces, terms such as "dither", "hesitate", or "mouthfuls" are inscribed. In short, this is clearly the site of an unsuccessful scientific experiment, where chance, subjectivity (as opposed to scientific objectivity), and embodiment ruled.[37] By refusing to depict the aseptic white cube of the modern laboratory, *Apparatus for the Distillation of Vague Intuitions* valorizes premodern forms of knowing and exhibits *how* science is made rather than the instantaneous glorification of scientific discoveries. A process, not a petrified moment in time, is at stake in this laboratory of failure.[38]

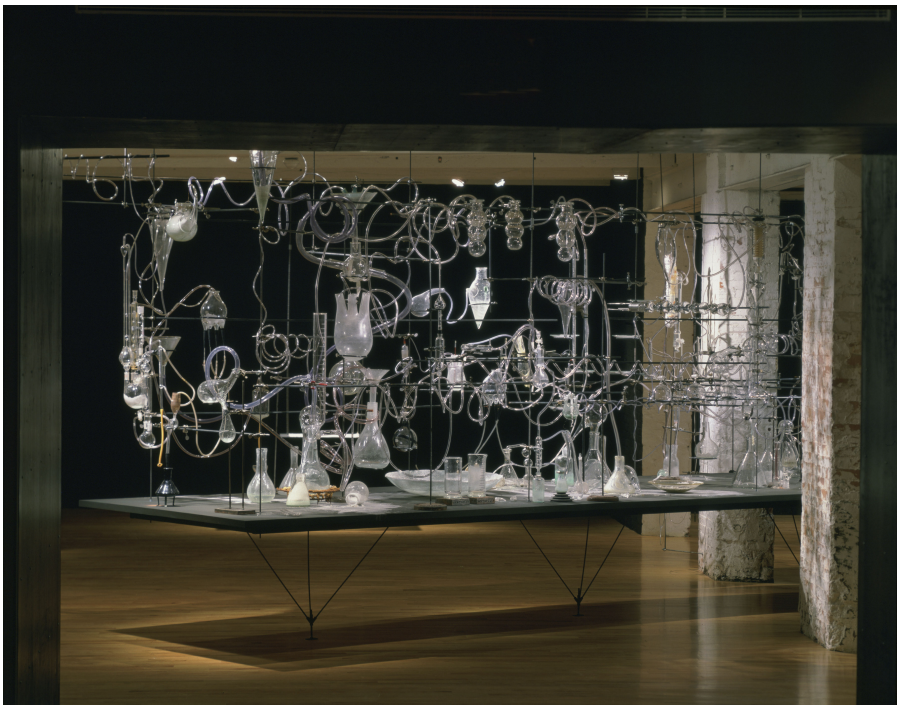
What I encapsulate as the epistemic slowness of the installations discussed in this section similarly points to something in process. *Halfway to Invisible* did not simply unleash scientific evidence on the effects of radiation exposure; its role was not merely to stage scientific information. The artist stated as much when she said that the work was not seeking to propose a pat answer, solution, or

35
Voyles, Wastelanding, 154.

36
Erin La Cour, Katja Kwastek, Lutz Koepnick, and Kevin Hamilton, The Aesthetics and Politics of Slowness. A Conversation, in: *ASAP Journal* 4/3, 2018, 467–483.

37
Different instruments included in the installation – flasks, measuring liquids, cylindrical bottles, and Burette clamps – directly reference chemistry labs. The choice of chemistry is not anodyne given the low seat it occupies in the deeply hierarchized landscape of scientific knowledge (as compared, for instance, to physics), which has been especially picked up by female historians of science, like Isabelle Stengers and Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent.

38
I elaborate further on the installation's processual aspect in: Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou, The Function and Dysfunction of Science. Artists Inside and Outside the Laboratory, in: *Espace Art Actuel* 126, 2020, 18–27.



[Fig. 11]
Eve Andrée Laramée, Apparatus for the Distillation of Vague Intuitions, 1994, steel, hand-blown and laboratory glass etched with text, copper, salt, flowers, installation view, Mass-MoCA, 2001 © The artist.

conclusion.[39] Rather, it pointed to the mechanisms that define these same effects, and more precisely to the historical rhythms through which those effects come into public visibility (or not, as Hecht's nuclearity shows us). To do so, Laramée flipped the script to some extent by subtly relocating the process of knowledge production from the scientific community to the Indigenous communities who actually worked in the mines. This shift in focus raises a further question about nuclearity's production: what other realms of knowledge does epistemic slowness interfere with?

Before concluding, let us situate the installation from a different perspective, at the confluence of science, cultural knowledge, and aesthetics.[40] Amid the terms used to cover up the lightboxes, one could read various words underscoring scientific authority as enumerated before, for instance "indefinite" and "resolve". Some of the lightboxes, however, superimposed different languages and types of information: in one, the Navajo word *ah-chanh* (protect) overlaid a human genome map and a traditional Navajo basket design. In another, the term *blih-he-neh* (warning) masked a cellular representation [Fig. 12]. The choice to interlace Native American and Western words and signs testified to the fact that the violence exerted against the Navajo miners by the uranium mining industry was not only bodily, but also cultural and geographical; the techniques, rites, social uses, and social life spaces of these populations were intoxicated just as their bodies were.

The choice to operate in the realm of language is no accident on Laramée's behalf. The Navajo have unique obstacles to face in recognizing radiation-induced illness as, for example, the Navajo language does not contain the necessary terms to describe certain novel symptoms. As some historians have put it: "In contrast to the anglophone populations, Navajos had to develop a nuclear lexicon."[41] Lexical and symbolic interventions into the images invite us to consider the temporal sites when knowledge was produced in contrast to the epistemic slowness that prohibited the production and circulation of knowledge about radiological dangers. Against epistemic slowness, Laramée posits a nonlinear and open-ended organization of competing temporal registers.

39
Laramée in the exhibition leaflet, n.p.

40
This last insight is very much inspired by the recent work of art historian Amanda Boetzkes around the linking of Inuit knowledge and scientific knowledge on glacier melt. See, for instance, Amanda Boetzkes, How to See a Glacier in a Climate Landscape, in: *Weber. The Contemporary West* 34/1, 2018, 123–137. This is a special issue on "The Anthropocene".

41
Barbara Johnston, Susan Dawson, and Gary Madsen, Uranium Mining and Milling. Navajo Experiences in the American Southwest, in: Laura Nader (ed.), *The Energy Reader*, Malden, MA 2010, 132–146, here 140.

[Fig. 12]
Eve Andrée Laramée, Halfway to Invisible, 2009, lightbox details superimposing Navajo language transliteration, genome map, and traditional basket design © The artist.

IV. Toward Open-Endedness

Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, the authors of "On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene", remind us that "In gesturing to Indigenous suffering in North America we have great responsibilities to also attend to the time-scapes and realities of those people and communities whose ancestors were violently dispossessed through Transatlantic slave trade."[42] The two artists examined in this essay pay close attention to the ways uranium mining industries have manipulated time in such a way as to disturb long-standing relations to land. Despite the material slowness of radiation, such disturbances have led to profound disruptions by interfering with Indigenous cultural knowledge – language for Laramée, and origin myths for Devine. The reorganization of competing epistemic temporalities in *Halfway to Invisible* acknowledges the importance of attending to time frames beyond the immediacy of profit and the strategic slowness of science. The example of *Rooster Rock, the Story of Serpent River* shows how an intentionally open ending demands the ongoing-ness of political struggles against the ongoing effects of nuclear toxicity on the Serpent River community. Both works address the material slowness of radiation by seeking frameworks that might accommodate, and importantly account for, its elusiveness by cultivating incompletion as an aesthetic and political strategy. Yet neither Devine nor Laramée are propelled forward by a teleological drive towards resolution. To think of time through open-endedness is to resist narratives that seek to establish closure and linearity in nuclear histories, whether in places like Canada's Serpent River or the US Southwest.

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42
Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene, in: *ACME. An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 16/4, 2017, 761–780, here 772–773.

ber 2024). In 2022–2023, she was postdoctoral fellow at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg, RWTH Aachen University. She was awarded her PhD from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris in 2021, supported by an Onassis Foundation scholarship, with a dissertation entitled *Dwelling, Extracting, Burying. Nuclear Imaginaries in Contemporary Art (1970–2020)*.

OF SCALES AND TIMES

PLANETARY FRICTION AT PLAY IN THE WORK OF SIMRYN GILL

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ABSTRACT

This essay draws on the notions of scalability and friction elaborated by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing in the context of South East Asian plantations to consider two series of works "Vegetation" (1999–2016) and "Naga Doodles" (2017) created by artist Simryn Gill (Singapore, 1959). By outlining the material properties, processes, and media Gill uses, it offers a critique of economic standardisation, and accompanying hierarchies that mobilise anthropocentric beliefs and assumptions about time and space. Importantly, it suggests that Gill's works invite ecological readings and warnings that are cosmological and concern the fate of this planet.

KEYWORDS

Scale; Scalability; Friction; Plantation; Process; Sacred; Ecology.

> Scale is the spatial dimensionality necessary for a particular kind of view, whether up close or from a distance, microscopic or planetary [...] Scale is not just a neutral frame for viewing the world; scale must be brought into being: proposed, practiced, and evaded, as well as taken for granted.[1]

Scholars have long endeavoured to restructure the idea of modernism, highlighting the plural temporal dimensions underpinning it rather than simply plotting a single, universal, and linear timeline. Such engagement with modernism globally has generated an unforeseen refusal of what anthropologist Anna Tsing calls *scalability*. For Tsing, scalability represents the property of a system to grow, maintain its original framework, and yet accommodate more stuff with minimum expenditure.[2] She defines this trick as the "precision nesting" of scales when applied to the realm of design: "the small is encompassed neatly by the large only when both are crafted for uniform expansion".[3] Scalability operates across computers, in business, the "conquest" of nature, and, more generally, world-making and terra-formation processes.[4] In this compelling account, the plantation system, which Tsing calls "a machine for replication", is *the* scalable project, one that historically predates, and possibly inspired the factory model and the universalisation of a particular modular interpretation of labour and time.[5]

To build on Tsing's argument, plantation time is linear, developmental, and secular. It was made global during the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the very design of the plantation was engineered with the specific purpose of remaking the world as a future asset. To achieve this end, all those vernacular worlds and cosmologies – times and spaces – that opposed plantation time and stood in the way of globalisation had to be *othered* and exterminated.

Tsing alerts us to the fact that modernisation requires that the transformative, that is, social properties of nature be eradicated to become the raw material for *techne*: the implementation of a human design on nature.[6] Human and more-than-human entanglements

1
Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction. An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton, NJ 2005, 58.

2
Aarthi Vadde, Scalability, in: *Modernism/Modernity* 2/4, 2018, 1–2.

3
Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, On Non-Scalability. The Living World Is not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales, in: *Common Knowledge* 18/3, 2012, 505–524, here 507.

4
Ibid., 505.

5
Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Earth Stalked by Man, in: *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 34/1, 2016, 2–16. Art historian Jill Casid calls the plantation "a hybrid agro-industrial landscape, a landscape machine". See *Sowing Empire. Landscape and Colonization*, Minneapolis 2005, 44.

6
Tsing, On Non-Scalability, 513.

must be removed for expansion, for growth to occur in the plantation. Under the logic of scalability, ecologies are violently reshaped. Felix Guattari named three: those of the environment, of social relations, and of human subjectivity.[7]

To visualise what Tsing might mean by the world-making properties of scalable design, let us consider a 3-D portable diorama of a rubber plantation developed ca. 1950 in Manchester (England), and exhibited for educational and promotional purposes [Fig. 1]. In this diorama, a miniaturised model of a rubber plantation displays two-dimensional cut-outs of indentured labourers, presumably of Tamil origin. A function of both space and time, the practice of shaping standards in direct relation to the activity they organise is illustrated through this diorama: the first labourer taps the bark of the tree with his knife, the second collects the milky latex (caoutchouc) in a bucket. The 3-D model also includes a real tapping knife, rubber seeds, two jars of rubber, and raw specimens of crepe rubber – coagulated latex rolled out and vulcanised into a crinkled sheet. The segregated stand-in workers are positioned carefully against the lime-coloured and perforated, gridded background, in perspectival arrangement. The model implies a sequential yet linear organisation of labour under the invisible but totalising servitude of indenture. Further, the model is self-contained, implying a loss of self in which "time penetrated the body and with it all meticulous controls of power".[8] The movements of a labouring body in relation to the plant are designed to make possible the most efficient use of time (and space): "nothing must remain idle or useless, everything must be called to form the support of the act required."[9] The portable diorama also includes a map of the planet illustrating the vast regions in which rubber plantations have been successfully implanted; a caption indents the image: rubber is successfully grown in Brazil, Nigeria, and the Belgian Congo [Fig. 2]. The diorama effectively packages the economy and ecology of manageable industrial production for the potential future global investor: from seed to packaged product.

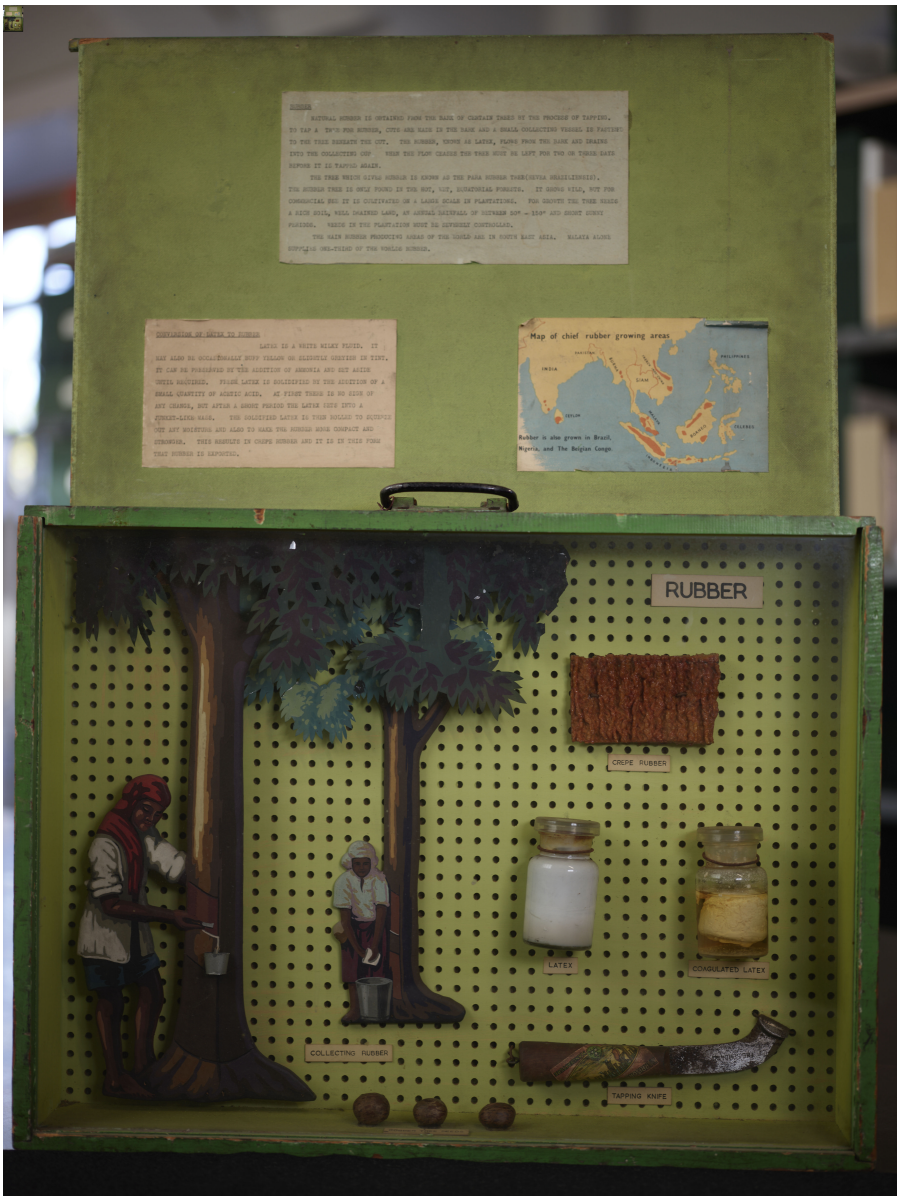
Historically, processes of primitive accumulation concretised into the factory-like production model of the plantation. The plantation followed a reproducible expandable business growth model: exterminate local people and plants; bring in an exotic and isolated labour workforce; prepare the now-empty, unclaimed land; and grow alien crops for production. As several scholars have pointed out, the plantation represents a system engineered to create novel habitats in agricultural landscapes for profit with species compo-

7
Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, London/New Brunswick, NJ 2000, 68.

8
Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, New York 1995, 152.

9
Ibid.

[Fig. 1]
Diorama of a Rubber Plantation, Educational Box, ca. 1948, mixed media, 70 × 63 cm, MANCH 672575, Manchester Museum, Manchester.



[Fig. 2]
Diorama of a Rubber Plantation, Educational Box, ca. 1948, mixed media, 70 × 63 cm, MANCH 672575, Manchester Museum, Manchester.

sitions different from those in forests and farmlands. Typically, in the British colonial administrative model, involving large-scale plantations, centralised irrigation authorities, and other modernisation efforts, the concept of the environment, ecology, was linked to theories of political domination. It is useful to recall that the word *ecology* or *okologie* was coined by German scientist Ernst Haeckel in 1866, the year before Marx's publication of *Das Kapital*. Haeckel drew on the same Greek root *oikos* for house or household, out of which had arisen the word 'economy' – the managing and administering of a household. For Haeckel ecology related to what Darwin in the *Origin of Species* (1859) had called the "economy of nature", the management of nature.[10] David Gilmartin writes that in the case of British colonial scientific and horticultural advocates, "the definition of the environment as a natural field to be dominated for productive use, and the definition of the British as a distinctive colonial ruling class over alien peoples, went hand in hand".[11] Yet plantations are formed in vernacular soils and histories, which tie them to the contingencies of encounters and the peculiarities of places and times – not all plantations are alike. With the production of universality, every-whereness, and linear 'global' time we also have the emergence of non-reducible histories and temporalities through the violent slow process of what Tsing calls "friction". "Friction" is what you get through contact by rubbing two 'things', entities, or bodies together through "historical contingency, and unexpected conjuncture".[12]

Drawing on Tsing's notion of friction, this essay considers the work of artist Simryn Gill (Singapore, 1959) in relation to notions of scalability, process, and time. Through her work, Gill draws attention to the oversimplification imposed by humans on nature, making one aware of the vertiginous experience and processes of scale-making in the 'local' oil palm plantation estate located in the vicinity of Port Dickson (Malaysia). Oil palm (*Elaeis guinensis*), introduced to the tropical habitat of Malaysia only two generations ago, has emerged as a significant world-making cash crop, transforming landscapes irreversibly.[13] Gill engages with scale not simply as a metonymical reflection about the world, but rather, to respond to the standardised ecological system of the plantation and its enforced hierarchies that mobilise global beliefs and assumptions

10
Haeckel's brand of social Darwinism, and emphasis on the purity of race, was eventually to exert influence in a tragic direction: national socialism and industrial-necropolitical scalable plans for purity in Europe. See John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology. Materialism and Nature*, New York 2000, 195.

11
David Gilmartin, Scientific Empire and Imperial Science. Colonialism and Irrigation Technology in the Indus Basin, in: *Journal of Asian Studies* 53/4, 1994, 1127–1149, here 1127.

12
Tsing, On Non-Scalability, 510.

13
Stephen Harris, *What Have Plants Ever Done for Us?*, Oxford 2015, 215–216.

about time and place. Through the use of photography and indexical (1:1) processes of record-making, her multiple series yield an experience of sheer duration in material terms, inviting an ecological and cosmological reading, if we take this latter term to mean discourse about the order of the cosmos and its ultimate and unknowable destiny.[14]

I. Becoming Owl

> 'What a curious feeling!' said Alice, 'I must be shutting up like a telescope.'
> And so it was indeed: she was now only ten inches high, and her face
> brightened up at the thought that she was now the right size
> for going through the little door into that *lovely garden*.[15]

In a black-and-white photograph Simryn Gill hides in plain sight [Fig. 3]. Standing still in a clearing amidst the dense foliage, she holds up a diminutive house. She gives the impression of being stuck in it or unable to move or hiding behind the house. This combination of fear and play – of hiding in plain sight – returns us and Gill to a forgotten world of unexplored possibilities and limitless imagination. The monumental stilt house positioned before her solicits specific attention to her scale – Gill is dwarfed by the bird house.[16]

In relation to the calibrations of scaling Tsing writes that the art of conjuring "is supposed to call up a world more dreamlike and sweeter than anything that exists; magic rather than unsparing description calls capital".[17] The photograph does involve a certain sleight of hand, perhaps even a form of conjuring. Gill is *kidding us*, not being straight with us, as she curves the line to throw into question our sense of scale – the comparison made between that constant – the human body – and the object in the foreground, the pole-mounted house. Part of a performative, ludic exercise, Gill worked hard to get this image right (one is tempted to use the word 'precise'). She fabricated the model house, trespassed onto privately owned land, or possibly bribed someone, located with the aid of an assistant a suitable clearing in the oil palm plantation, and after

14
For an account of the relationship between scale and loss in sculpture and photography see Rachel Wells, The Scale at Which Loss Is Visible. Life-Size Hauntings in Contemporary Art, in: Patrizia Piacentini (ed.), *(S)Proporzioni. Taglia e Scala tra Testo e Immagini*, Milan 2021, 135–150.

15
Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, London 1865, 11. Emphasis added.

16
From the series "Vegetation" (1999–2016), the photograph is printed in the pocket-sized book *Becoming Palm* (2018), co-authored with Michael Taussig. *Becoming Palm* was prompted by a lecture delivered by Taussig titled 'A Test Case: The Palm Plantation as Violence and Art' in 2016, Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, in which he addressed the African Palm in the context of northern Colombia where it is known as a 'paramilitary crop'.

17
Tsing, Friction, 58–59.

[Fig. 3]
Simryn Gill, Vegetation, from "Vegetation", 1999–2016, gelatin silver print, 26.5 × 26.5 cm, Sydney, Artist's Collection © Simryn Gill.

much hustle and bustle, adjusting and rehearsal, produced a series of carefully orchestrated photographs with her Hasselblad camera. The ultimate product of this exchange, the photographic image, offers the viewer an incongruent expectation of scale: a hapless and shrunken Alice in a dubious wonderland. This rearrangement of Gill and the house could be said to operate within the purview of the miniature, broadly defined by Susan Stewart as "an experience of interiority" in opposition to the "gigantic" viewed as a projection towards the outside.[18] In this well-known account, the reduction of scale at work in the miniature frames the viewing encounter as a specific act of possession. Stewart links the enclosure of the human and the rearrangement of nature to a Victorian desire to domesticate and re-form nature within cultural categories; the process is often acquisitive.[19] Miniature time does not in this account "attach itself to lived historical time" but rather, to the space and time of the metaphor which in turn makes "everyday life absolutely anterior, and exterior to itself".[20] The compression of scale effected by the miniature distorts everyday time and quotidian space, and finds its "use value" transformed into the infinite time of the dream-world, of reverie and child's play. The chief property of the miniature is to produce a time that is different, and transcend the change and flux of lived reality; the unfolding of time is linked to nostalgia, to childhood, and manipulative experiences.[21] Stewart posits a phenomenological correlation between the experience of scale and that of duration, and furthermore, notes that "the reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld".[22]

It might be possible to let Gill's photograph enchant us further and do a different kind of work.[23] The photograph functions as make-believe theatre prop weathering into something real. "The pretend world of conceit envisages a fairy tale way of rethinking ontology, meaning the nature of Being, meaning the nature of nature", writes Michael Taussig.[24] Included in Gill's book *Becoming Palm*, co-authored with Taussig in 2018, the photograph is part of

18
Susan Stewart, *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Baltimore 1993, 68–69.

19
Ibid.

20
Ibid., 65.

21
Ibid.

22
Ibid.

23
Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Time of Democracy*, Durham, NC 2021, 224.

24
Simryn Gill and Michael Taussig, *Becoming Palm*, Berlin 2018, 45.

the book's broader corpus of black-and-white images. The little book is conceived in the form of a pilgrimage to the enchanting site of the oil palm monoculture; it shuttles between home and shrine, profane and sacred, official and unofficial voices. It also involves playful forms of writing, parodic lists, drawings, doodling, spoof indexes, and jokes, all of which de-familiarise and interrogate *objective* ethnographic methods of field observation, classification, and taxonomic description. Photographs of decaying monuments litter the pages, and speak of their transient and contingent status, connecting separate realms of different temporal and spatial orders: termite mounds, monuments to awe-inspiring animals, the ravaged billiard table of a plantation estate owner discarded from a British Army officer's mess hall – "a shrine to domination over the land".[25] The objects are recast as miniaturised decomposing forms, ravaged by tropical storms: a tour, or pilgrimage, of the monuments of the plantation.

What exactly is the scale of Gill in the photograph? What of this optical stunt? To dispel the magic at work, put things into secular proportion, and get a grip or perspective on the photograph, let me give you the facts (and spoil it all): the image displays a 10-metre-high nesting box, a designed modular unit of controlled expansion engineered by plantation owners in Malaysia to house wild barn owls. To put it straight: breeding grounds for flighty cash-sacks.[26] Domestication of this wild bird, which Gill refers to as "the king of wild workers" in the Malay tropical forest habitat, is one of the last effective *natural*measures introduced by plantation owners to tackle the pervasive, costly, and large-scale pests affecting the sites: rats.[27] Rats feed on the shiny, thick, fleshy, and oil-rich coat protecting the seed of the palm. Since the introduction of thousands of these domestic infrastructures (Gill playfully calls them "bird hotels"), owl populations have radically increased, yielding magical, economic benefits in the plantation: oil palm fruit harvests have soared. The size and shape of these hand-made, double-chambered boxes equipped with a resting perch at the entrance hole recall those of the Victorian dollhouse. The barn owl has been naturalised, assigned a home in the colony, and is a beneficiary of a 'job'; a valued productive member in the managed, and highly competitive, ecology of the plantation. Gill, who has no apparent role in the plantation, appears to stake a small claim to a home for herself from within the photographic frame.

[25] Ibid., 23.

[26] Ecologist John Howes, Technical Programme Director at Wild Asia, states that "by mid-1994 it was estimated that there were 9,000 owl nest boxes erected in Malaysian agricultural lands (1,300 in paddy fields and the remainder in oil palm estates)". He estimates that with average occupancy rates of around 40% (but up to 80% in oil palm habitats), most of the Malaysian Barn Owl population is now nest-box dependent. I am grateful to John for sharing this information with me in an email exchange.

[27] Gill and Taussig, Becoming Palm, 17.

The plantation represents the most economically efficient ecological system (or managed household), one that, as Bruno Latour put it, is obsessed with the future, and organised by this temporal idea as a "path to progress". This condition separates beings from life, and prevents each from "thinking, imagining, and noticing relations".[28] Gill, however, puts humour into the picture, alerting one to the issue of making-habitat, of belonging, and of living, in the plantation.

Of the process of making photographs, Gill has said that it "is about becoming porous to a situation".[29] In relation to this specific photograph, she writes that it was an attempt to "invite the spirit of the barn owl into the little house", which could also mean, to become a portal, a gateway, and in this process, to disappear her own self.[30] Becoming-shrine, becoming-owl, Gill turns into a kind of comical assemblage, part-human, part-thing. She draws attention to the sovereign status enjoyed by owls in the plantation and treats the newly erected bird houses as utilitarian temples of modern development. This staging solicits the recovery of older, perhaps defunct shrines, built by indentured labourers working at the plantations to ward off danger and seek the protection of the gods from lurking animal predators. Gill writes: "people had to find their own ways to be in these new places – to know how to read the terrain, how to speak to the local spirits. They brought their own gods and found new ones lurking in the folds of the land; they built small shrines where they made offerings to appease the gods."[31]

Indenture came to replace slavery after 1833 as the primary method of supply and maintenance of labour on the West Indies sugar plantations, and was extended from there to newly developing monocultures of rubber in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and Malaysia (Malay Peninsula).[32] Botanists from Kew Gardens (London) engineered the scalable system of indenture in Malaysia; the latter typically involved Tamil labourers imported from Ceylon to husband rubber plants. In the case of Gill, whose family business was actively involved in the motorised transportation of rubber goods to and from the town of Port Dickson (south of Kuala Lumpur on the Malacca Strait, one of the world's busiest shipping lanes), plantations were a familiar site; in her time, as she states, "they've never not

28
Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, Anna Tsing, and Niels Bubandt, Anthropologists Are Talking – About Capitalism, Ecology, and Apocalypse, in: *Ethnos* 83/3, 2018, 587–606, here 590.

29
Gill quoted by Kajri Jain, Pause, in: *Here Art Grows on Trees* (exh. cat. Venice, Australian Pavilion), ed. by Catherine de Zegher, Venice 2013, 169.

30
Gill and Taussig, Becoming Palm, 17.

31
Ibid., 18.

32
Ashley Dawson, *Extinction. A Radical History*, New York/London 2016, 48.

been there".[33] These newly built bird houses are homes for protective gods "for a different class of worshippers": the managerial class of plantation owners.[34] It is possible then to treat this photograph as a playful commentary about the novel forms of home-making and idol-worship enshrined by scalability, and further, of the shrinking role of the human within it. This model of worship, Gill seems to suggest, is perfectly compatible, indeed utterly necessary to the totalising expansion of the frictionless and world-making, wonder-cash crop: palm oil.

II. Rubbing It In – "Naga Doodles" (2017)

Positing the plantation as an enchanted enclosure, Gill also directs her attention to beings that have perished in the making of scalable projects. Her series "Naga Doodles" (2017) offers a series of ink rubbings displaying the literal imprint of snake roadkill in about a 50-mile radius of Port Dickson. Gill found and collected the carcasses whilst driving to and from the plantation, the escapee animals having moved beyond the physical boundary lines of the oil palm estate. Fugitives from the enclosure, the snakes precipitate their own demise. Gill hints at the fact that doubt underscores how scale is constructed and experienced. She observes the impact of plantation ecosystems on these animal species: "Many of these snakes if not most run through plantations. The variety and ecology of snakes has been deeply affected by the plantations, some gaining favour, and others being decimated, their habitats and sustenance gone. Roads cut through their habitats; and it is mostly males as they need to find new mating grounds upon maturing hence the dangerous road and highway crossings."[35] In the oil palm plantation snakes are sometimes put to work and released by humans in the estates to keep down rats but they do not rank as high as the barn owl in the man-made food chain system. Snakes typically abhor domestication, they *hide*, and do not benefit from the protection of domestic infrastructures in the plantation. For this reason, they have found themselves "on the wrong side of the divide; untameable freewheeling creatures who had no functional purpose within the scheme of things".[36] Or one could say, they are beings that have no use or purpose in the scaled production of the palm oil commodity. In her influential account of friction, Tsing singles out tarmac – the road – as exemplifying how this very process both impedes and

33
Gill and Taussig, Becoming Palm, 7.

34
Ibid.

35
Gill in conversation with the author, email correspondence, September 2019.

36
Gill and Taussig, Becoming Palm, 12.

facilitates human locomotion through motorisation. Roads generate pathways that accelerate movement and make it smoother, more efficient, yet they also "limit where we go. The ease of travel they facilitate is also a structure of confinement."[37] Both a micro and a macro study, Tsing's account of friction is largely concerned with the violent impact of the cash crop of rubber in Indonesia, ranging from theft of the plant to the savagery of European conquest, to the frenzy of botanical competition, chemical adaptation, industrial tyres, and the crushing of rubber workers' unions. Friction "reveals the grip of encounter" between particulars, breaking down the abstract universal (development) into the concrete specificity. "Friction shows us where the rubber meets the road."[38] Whilst Tsing's musings on friction do not ponder the ghastly effects of motorisation on animal species, Gill adopts a process that involves this phenomenon to reveal quite literally its effects. In so doing, she 'rubs' natural history against ethnographic attentiveness – products of modern projects – to offer starting points for curious and playful engagement.[39] Moreover, she invites a querying of the issue of form (and scale) that pulls in the direction of metaphysics: a set of questions that leads to decisions on how to order and give form to the chaos of existence.

Gill, who describes herself primarily as a maker and keeper of records, has long engaged with indexical, record-making processes that yield complete renditions of objects [Fig. 4]. To produce "Naga Doodles", she scraped the squashed animal bodies from the tarmac, one at a time, covered each carcass with ink and superimposed sheets of paper, which she then rubbed through an up-and-down or circular repeated movement. She then slowly removed the paper without looking (blindly) to release the image. The result of this lengthy, sticky, and somewhat gruesome process is a graphic rubbing displaying a textured print made up of flattened membranes, snagging tissue, and ribbons of soft, delicate scales with occasional blotches of guts, excreta, and blood.

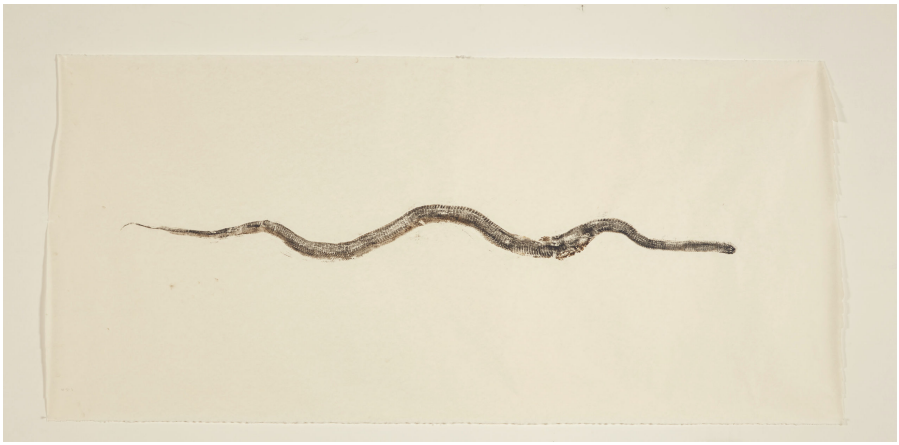
In relation to this time-consuming technique, Gill sets up a contrast with the reducible and scale-making properties of the medium of photography. She writes: "In direct print-making techniques such as ink rubbing, the medium itself also provides the index of scale, of course, but this is not the case with photography."[40] Rubbing is the name given to the technique of creating hand-made impressions from presumably whole objects without the interpolation of a

37
Tsing, Friction, 6.

38
Ibid.

39
Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Minneapolis 2017, 7.

40
Simryn Gill in: *Simryn Gill. The Opening Up of the World* (exh. cat. Lund, Lundskonsthall), ed. by Anders Kreuger, Lund 2017, 76–77.



[Fig. 4]
Simryn Gill, “Naga Doodles” 31/3 (Malayan Racer, Coelognathus flavolineatus), 2017, frottage, ink on paper, 96 × 130 cm, Sydney, Artist’s Collection © Simryn Gill.

maker; it is a process with a long history, and involves codifications or complete mappings of rough surfaces produced through haptic rather than visual contact (one has to remove the fingers to see what one's touching). The result of this process is indexical and entails a more accurate rendition of what French painter Yves Klein, in relation to his anthropometric paintings, called a pure phenomenology of the traces of the immediate.[41] This element of chance, or automatism, did not go unnoticed by the Surrealists; Max Ernst called this form of direct printing "frottage" – a word he himself coined. For Ernst, the action of frottage transformed base matter – floorboards, leaves, or twine – into revelatory images: an *histoire naturelle*. Yet for Ernst, the active intervention of the artist was required – the author as artist turns the formless world into a recognisable form by rubbing passively and generating chance-like images. Gill, by contrast, withholds active intervention, and draws attention to both the process – the rubbing – and the thing itself as an index of measures: 1:1.

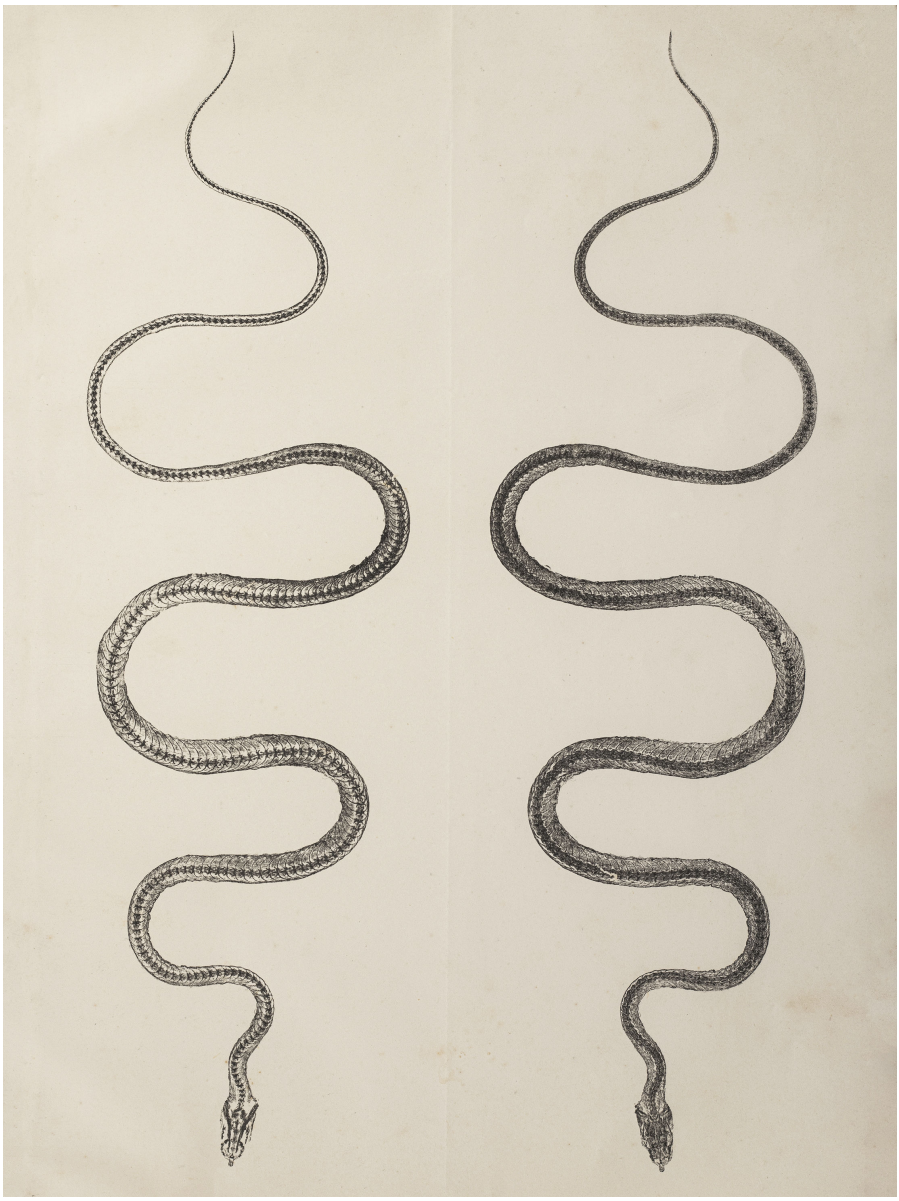
In the mid-nineteenth century, rubbings became a popular archaeological or palaeontological technique, far more suited to scientific documentation than photography; such technique could capture the most ancient but also the least visible, intimate traces of an object [Fig. 5]. Direct-printing method was also applied by nineteenth-century amateur botanists to convey a more accurate rendition of a plant specimen and its venation. In the specific case of flora, particularly ferns, it is related by the English botanist John Gough of Kendal, that, having become totally blind from small pox when two years old, he "so cultivated his other senses as to recognise by touch, smell, or taste, almost every plant within twenty miles of his native place".[42] Hence, it was believed that a good nature-print would convey to the eye the same class of positive impressions as those which were conveyed to the mind of Gough by other organs.[43]

Nature printing thus constituted an improvement upon old methods of relaying graphic information about botanical (and sometimes animal) specimens, in as much as it represented not only general form with absolute accuracy, but also surface, veins, and other minutiae of superficial structure by which plants are known irrespective of the hidden details of their internal organisation. But nature printing had its defects as well as its advantages: formed through pressure and friction, it could only represent what lay upon the surface, and not the whole even of that. As is well known, botanical classification held a privileged place in the historical begin-

41
Sidra Stich, *Yves Klein*, Berlin 1994, 171–191.

42
Thomas Moore, *The Ferns of Great Britain and Ireland, Nature-Printed by Henry Bradbury, 1855–1856*, ed. by John Lindley, London 1855, n.p.

43
Ibid.



[Fig. 5]
Henry Smith, Snake, 1857, ink on paper, 51 × 34 cm, Madras, in: Specimens of Nature Printing from Unprepared Plants, Madras 1857, plate 100, FF582.4 (084.1) SMI, Linnean Society of London © Linnean Society of London.

[Fig. 6]
John Betteridge Stair, Coconut, 1843, ink on paper, 80 × 53 cm, Upolu, Samoa, in: John Betteridge Stair, Impressions of Tropical Foliage, & co., Printed from Natural Specimens Collected in Upolu, Samoa 1843, np, MS 659A/B, Linnean Society of London © Linnean Society of London.

nings of modern scientific knowledge [Fig. 6]. Artists and scientists became embroiled in the quest to scale-make the planet, and universalise the study of nature to create a singular, objective, and globalised knowledge.[44] In the realm of botany, nascent image-making technologies were an important catalyst for the transformation of hidden "mysteries into fact", and the evolution of consciousness.[45] Only when observations of particular specimens were compatible and collapsible across generalised scales could they be properly incorporated into a universal logic. In this respect, nature-printing technologies encapsulated a moment when a greater desire for objectivity – or truth to nature – emerged.[46] To be objective was to aspire to knowledge that bore no trace of the knower – knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgement, wishing or striving.[47] Objectivity became equated with blind sight, to the act of seeing with no interference, interpretation, or intelligence. More recently, Georges Didi-Hubermann has echoed these ideas in relation to the rubbings produced by artist Giuseppe Penone, suggesting that this technique can release the image as either "a brief time-period (the passage of animals) or long time-periods (geological formations) that have become hardened and compressed like charcoal [...] An imprint of time, a fossil."[48]

Of this nineteenth-century, obsolete process, Gill has said that she enjoys the fact that the object, the plant, the animal she rubs dictates the way of making: "it is *non-negotiable*", it is what it is, which also means not scalable or at least, not reducible or collapsible to any agreed abstract measurement determined by human interest or utility.[49] The technique of rubbing itself requires a certain removal of agency on the part of the maker; it is a record in which abstract measurement demands nothing from what is measured and can relate indifferently to rats, men, trees, or a rolling marble. Here, the property of being non-negotiable might also mean not open to discussion or modification in the sense that the object picked and placed under scrutiny precludes anthropomorphic, subjective decisions pertaining to form, composition, and hierarchy. Gill removes her conscious self and becomes a medium or vector for friction; in the process she submits images as records that mess and confound

44
Tsing, Friction, 88–89.

45
Ibid., 88.

46
Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, Princeton, NJ 2007, 17.

47
Ibid.

48
Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Being a Skull. Place, Contact, Thought, Sculpture*, Minneapolis 2015, 63.

49
Daston and Galison, Objectivity, 17.

the perceived binaries between "culture and nature, psychic interior and corporeal exterior, voluntarism and determinism, self and environment".[50]

III. Conclusion

A limbless animal, the snake's lack of external organs dislocates not only the representation of animal organisms, but further, challenges the very organisation of human thinking and motion in space and time. (The ancient Greeks called its enigmatic movement "pneumatic".[51]) The snake is propelled by the friction produced by its own scales, and ability to redistribute its weight when slithering along flat surfaces. Its movement arrested and enchanted the attention of European historians – particularly that of Aby Warburg and Johann Joachim Winckelmann.[52] The title "Naga Doodles" does not allude to these illustrious European historians (or histories) but rather invokes other mythical, sacred, and zoological realms. *Naga* means dragon in Malay. The *Nāga* is the Sanskrit and Pali word for a god, or awesome snake, specifically, the king cobra that appears in the Indian religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.[53] Typically, in Indian legend, *Nagas* are serpents that *take the form of a human*. Jorge Luis Borges, in his account of *Imaginary Beings*, offers a series of mythical and felicitous encounters between man and this elusive animal. He recounts the story of the Buddha meditating under a fig tree, chastised by the wind and rain. The *Naga* out of pity wraps itself around him in a sevenfold embrace and opens over him its seven heads to form a makeshift umbrella. Only then, in the grip of encounter, "the Buddha converts him to the faith".[54] A case of nature turning into culture, of nature becoming an artificial refuge, or a kind of shelter for man through contact and entanglement.[55] In his account, Borges also reminds the reader of another story relating to the sacred serpent in which the cloudlike reptile takes refuge deep underground in a palace. He writes: "Believers in the Greater Vehicle tell that the Buddha preached one law to mankind

50
Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar. The Economies of Indian Calendar Art*, Durham, NC 2007, 318.

51
Spyros Papapetros, *On the Animation of the Inorganic. Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life*, Chicago 2012, 71.

52
In his description of the *Laocoon* Winckelmann entangled snakes with the origins of Western art history and European architectural history.

53
Gill, The Opening Up of the World, 76–77.

54
Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, trans. by Margarita Guerrero, London 1970, 165.

55
Ibid.

and another to the gods, and that this latter – the secret law – was kept in the heavens and palaces of the serpents who revealed it centuries later to the monk Nagarjuna."[56] Yet the most relevant myth about the *Naga* is the one set down by the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien in the early fifteenth century: a story that involves an experience of things that exceed human sensorial apprehension and are therefore unmeasurable (trans-human). The story is also about competing and incommensurable scales. It goes:

> King Asoka came to a lake near whose edge stood a lofty pagoda. He thought of pulling it down in order to raise a higher one. A Brahman let him into the tower and once inside told him: My human form is an illusion. I am really a Naga, a dragon. My sins condemn me to inhabit this frightful body, but I obey the law preached by the Buddha and hope to work my redemption. You may pull down this shrine if you believe you can build a better one.[57]

In the story the *Naga* shows the king the vessels of the altar. We are told that the alarmed king (who later embraced Buddhism) left the pagoda standing for it was unlike anything "made by the hands of men".[58] Gill's invocation of this prosaic and mythological creature gestures to the realm of the sacred in which "scale" – and by extension, the modernity attached to "scalability" – escapes human grasp, and opens to dimensions that are metaphysical, incommunicable, and immeasurable (Kant would call this terrifying realm that of *the sublime*). In conclusion, it is worth recalling the essay *Science as a Vocation* – published a century ago – in which Max Weber submitted that "the fate of our times is characterised, above all, by the disenchantment of the world", a phenomenon he attributed to the intellectualisation and rationalisation produced by modern forms of social organisation.[59] By *disenchantment* Weber referred to the vanishing of the sacred from the world – one could also say the globalisation of scalability. Silvia Frederici interprets Weber's warning in a more political sense; she believes that this cautionary message indicts those humans who fail to recognise the existence of a time and space other than capitalist development.[60] Gill's playful engagement with the notion of scale in her photographic per-

56
Ibid.

57
Ibid., 165–166.

58
Ibid., 166.

59
Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, New York 2019, 188–189.

60
Ibid.

[Fig. 7]
Exhibition View, Simryn Gill, "Naga Doodles", 2017, frottage, ink on paper, dimensions variable, in the exhibition *Soft Tissue* (16 January – 2 March 2019), Mumbai, Jhaveri Contemporary, Courtesy: Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai; photograph: Mohammed Chiba.

formances ("Vegetation", 1999–2016) put pressure on established anthropocentric beliefs and assumptions about time and space as scalable entities. Her use of friction in the creation of the series ("Naga Doodles", 2017), gives visual form to the resistance one body encounters when moving over another in time and space; each yielded image thus offers a formal and material critique of the very notion of scalability. Ultimately "Naga Doodles" unfolds durationally, soliciting discussions about measure and the unmeasurable at the interface of art, science, and the sacred [Fig. 7].

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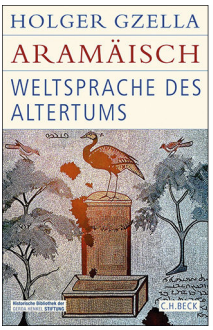
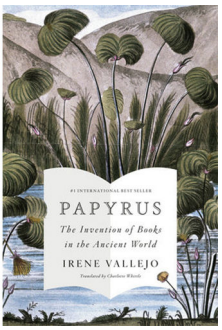
REVIEWS
REZENSIONEN

TWO BOOKS ON TRADITION

Holger Gzella, *Aramäisch. Weltsprache des Altertums*
Historische Bibliothek der Gerda Henkel Stiftung. Munich:
C. H. Beck 2023, 480 pages with 30 b/w ill. and 5 maps, ISBN
978-3-406-79348-6 (Hardcover).

Irene Vallejo, *Papyrus. The Invention of Books in the Ancient World*
Translated from Spanish by Charlotte Whittle.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2022, 464 pages,
ISBN 978-0-593-31889-8 (Hardcover).





Reviewed by
Benjamin Anderson

Where do we stand in relation to tradition? The question is both epistemological (how do we know the past?) and political (which past is ours, with whom do we share it?). It maintains its interest today, just as the answers retain their ambivalence, refusing neatly ideological resolution. On the one hand, we are fully aware that tradition can consolidate and buttress arbitrary monopolies on power and money. On the other hand, tradition has historically proven resilient to state censorship and disinformation campaigns and is thus uniquely capable of transmitting humane values.

Irene Vallejo's *Papyrus* and Holger Gzella's *Aramäisch* present two very different approaches to the question, addressed to two very different publics. Vallejo writes in a personal voice and wears her politics on her sleeve, while dutifully reproducing the classics in their eighteenth-century *Urform*, a story about the Greek origins of Europe. *Papyrus* has become (as the dust jacket puts it) "#1 International Best Seller", and was named a Financial Times Best Book of

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2022. It is tradition for the ladies and gentlemen sitting in business class. Gzella, by contrast, writes in the impersonal third-person of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, and avoids political commentary, all the while relentlessly exposing a key blind spot of the classics and presenting an alternative understanding of tradition itself. Aimed at nonspecialists, *Aramäisch* will likely reach a smattering of professors sitting in economy.

Vallejo holds a PhD in classical philology and has since built a career in feuilleton. *El infinito en un junco*, her history of Greek and Latin literature and impassioned plea for their preservation, was published in 2019, and has since appeared in some thirty-one translations.[1] Charlotte White's English rendition nicely conveys its chatty charm.

Papyrus is in many ways up to date with the discipline of classics. Thus reception history is central, with emphasis on modern European literature and film. Film is also a frequent source of analogy ("The scene, recounted by Plutarch, seems to pave the way for Robert De Niro's 'You talkin' to me?' scene in *Taxi Driver*", p. 185). Analogizing extends to artifacts: "ancient wax tablets were as likely to betray an affair as cell phones today" (p. 268). Vallejo is especially good on book history and its intersections with media studies, supplying enjoyable excurses on alphabets, writing supports, formats, libraries, bookstores, and habits of reading.

The elucidation of social contexts is part of the popular appeal, and it bears fruit especially in Vallejo's discussion of gender; for example, when she excavates "a current of female rebellion" under the surface of Periclean Athens (p. 151). She also offers passages of pure memoir, including raw tales of schoolyard bullying, which lend her voice a disarming vulnerability. Her historical interpretations are similarly psychologizing, as when "The idea of a mixed-race empire was galloping through Alexander's mind" (p. 14).

Vallejo's creative engagements with newer scholarship make her unreflective Eurocentrism all the more striking. Greek and Roman history are the origins of Europe, and Europe the sole heir to Greek and Latin literature. Thus Greek literature is "primitive European literature" (p. 157), and Hellenistic schools (whether in Africa, and Asia, or Europe) are "the root of European pedagogy" (p. 179). In brief, "Greece persists as the first mile of European culture" (p. 242). So too, if less frequently and more ambivalently, for Rome; as when censorship of Ovid constitutes "the beginning of moralizing in Europe" (p. 332).

Vallejo's Greek miracle begins in Athens ("the most important city on the planet", p. 176), and it produces an unimpeachably liberal politics. "Like its Roman counterpart, Hellenic civilization was essentially individualist and liberal. In those days there were plenty of Bill Gateses" (p. 180). This capacious concept of Greek freedom even survives Alexander, whose empire was "a new political form

[1] They are listed in the Spanish Wikipedia entry for *El infinito en un junco* (February 22, 2024).

with the potential to bring peace, culture, and laws to all human beings" (p. 230).

Near Eastern cultures are by contrast sterile, and cannot establish a tradition: "While the texts and even the languages of the earliest civilizations that invented writing in the Fertile Crescent – Mesopotamia and Egypt – were forgotten as the centuries passed, and, in the best-case scenarios, were deciphered long centuries later, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* have never been without readers" (p. 348).

This claim only holds if you disregard Hebrew and Aramaic literatures. On the other end of antiquity, Vallejo is oblivious to medieval afterlives for Greek literature on the borders of or beyond Europe, be they Byzantine or Islamic. Muslims appear as the destroyers of the Library of Alexandria (even as Vallejo dutifully flags the story as dubious), but we never hear about the Abbasid translation movement. Vallejo proudly claims Iberian authors like Martial and Quintilian (the latter was born "just 120 kilometers from where I am writing", p. 342), but has nothing to say about intellectual life al-Andalus. In short, she is invested in a very old story in which Europe begins in, and retains sole claim to, Greece.

Holger Gzella's *Aramäisch* is essentially a refutation of that old story. It is published in the *Historische Bibliothek der Gerda Henkel Stifting*, which is explicitly aimed at "einer interessierten Öffentlichkeit". However, Gzella, who is Professor Ordinarius for Old Testament Theology at LMU Munich, makes few concessions to the brief. If Vallejo's movie references signal her target audience, so too do Gzella's frequent allusions to German literary history and academic culture. We are warned against anachronistic praise of Achaemenid religious tolerance, "als ob Lessing auf dem königlichen Nachttisch gelegen hätte" (p. 161). The East Syrian Patriarch Timotheos I "[wäre heute ...] vermutlich Akademiepräsident" (p. 359), owing to his syntactically complex and diplomatic prose.

All this erudition serves, not to prop up an old story, but to forge a new one. Aramaic emerges in the *Kleinstaaterei* of the early iron age, ca. 1000 BC. It becomes a preferred medium of chancery scribes, supporting a common thread of administrative culture even as the neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian empires rise and fall. Aramaic literature, from an early age, expresses the worldview of clever, loyal, and experienced bureaucrats; its prototypical sage is the royal chancellor Ahiqar. The language receives standard form under the Achaemenids ("Reichsaramäisch"), and its scribes begin to assert religious authority, even deploying it to critique the rulers whom they serve. The half-Hebrew, half-Aramaic Book of Daniel, a historical novel of neo-Babylonian times composed under the Hellenistic Seleucids, is a key text, as when the scribal hero's decipherment of the Aramaic writing on the wall demonstrates his privileged access to divine knowledge.

Imperial Aramaic forms the shared substrate for new regional languages in the Roman period, even as religious literatures break free of the state bureaucracies. Aramaic becomes a second holy language for Jews from Jerusalem to Baghdad, the medium of rab-

binic lore in the Talmud and the retold scripture of the Targumim. Classical Syriac, born in Edessa, becomes the liturgical and literary language of Christians from western into central and southern Asia.

Arabic grows up alongside Aramaic in urban centers such as Petra and Tayma, such that the Qur'an is filled, not only with borrowed Aramaic words, but also with the scribal ethos of the Aramaic tradition. Contrast here Vallejo, who writes that "the Koran would describe Christians as 'Peoples of the Book' with a mixture of respect and astonishment" (p. 306). Gzella's account makes clear that *ahl al-kitāb* does not express Muslim awe at Christian book culture; rather, it signals Muslim access to and identification with a millennium-old tradition of Hebrew and Aramaic letters.

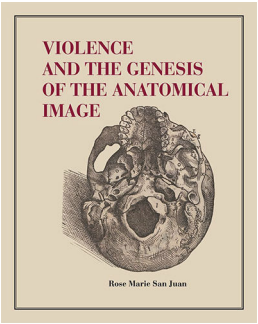
Gzella repeatedly rejects the cliche of the interrupted traditions of the ancient Near East (see the strong formulations at pp. 221 and 248). He furthermore shows how the Aramaic tradition can help us to rethink the idea of tradition in general. He insists that "Aramaic" does not name a people; it is rather "Sprache ohne eigenes Sprechervolk" (p. 34). It is not the bearer of a single culture, but a "Medium hybrider Selbstverständnisse" (p. 99) across many cultures and religions and over three thousand years. It nevertheless constitutes a coherent tradition, with special insight into the precarity attending officials "in den Vorzimmern der Macht" (p. 135). Aramaic literature is above all wisdom literature; its protagonists, from Ahiqar to Daniel, remain exemplary today.

What kind of tradition is this? From a distance, it resembles Leo Strauss's history of philosophy, that thin thread of skepticism covertly sustained from one hostile regime to the next, but the dynamics are quite different. Whereas Strauss's Maimonides and al-Farabi were forced by religious orthodoxy to conceal their atheism, Gzella's scribes invent religious orthodoxy as a check on imperial power. And unlike the hidden wisdom of Strauss's philosophers, the scribes' wisdom was written plainly and taught in school, where the story and sayings of Ahiqar were set as standard texts.

In short, Gzella shows how the traditional methods of philology (which he calls, quoting Shackleton Bailey, "looking things up", p. 44) can build new stories, not only about individual traditions, but about tradition itself. This is worthy of consideration by art historians, just as Gzella's reformulation of *Weltsprache* can help us to rethink how we write global art history. Global reach, if understood in military terms (Alexander conquered the world) or economic (international box office), is not the only, nor even the primary, criterion of notability. Of greater interest is the persistence of specific images that maintain their power as "media of hybrid self-understanding" (we might say "dialectical images") over long periods of time. The careful practice of art history ("looking at things"), combined with a critical attitude to claims of discontinuity, is well suited to reveal the wisdom of the image.

ROSE MARIE SAN JUAN, *VIOLENCE AND THE GENESIS OF THE ANATOMICAL IMAGE*

University Park, PA: Penn State University Press 2023, 238 pages with 26 color and 54 b/w ill., ISBN 978-0-271-09335-2 (Hardback).



Reviewed by
Alejandro Nodarse

Thresholds trouble us. Consider the word itself. Most etymologists liken *thresh* to *thrash* and invoke the trampling of the threshing floor, while the word's latter half, its *(h)old*, refuses consensus. Neither half speaks to the word's contemporary meaning, namely, its status as a boundary. "We are missing", one etymologist notes, "the moment at which the threshing floor [...] began to denote the entrance to the room."[1] Linguistic trouble continues. For the entrance to this "room" is not only architectural but takes a second form – that of the human (or animal) body. Thus, on the one hand, we may stand at *a* threshold; while, on the other, we may find ourselves at *our* threshold. Here, *in extremis*, the boundary condition appears as a subjective one: we feel pain.

In *Violence and the Genesis of the Anatomical Image*, Rose Marie San Juan lingers at the threshold. It was here that anatomical practice and imagery articulated the body in a state of transition: between life and death, subject and object, site and sight of knowl-

1 Anatoly Liberman, Our Habitat. Threshold, in: *Oxford University Press Blog*, February 11, 2015 (March 12, 2024).

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#1-2024, pp. 241–246

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edge. For Vesalius and for many of his contemporaries, as San Juan urges us to consider, the heart was best touched while beating. Certainly, to attend to the body in transition – to touch the still-beating heart – was understood as circumspect. (It still is.) Rather than turn away from this, San Juan asks that we see the anatomical impulse and the circumspection it effected as profoundly intertwined.

In the sixteenth century, to take but one emblematic example, Giorgio Vasari described the morbid fascination of Giovanni Lappoli, the Florentine painter who, according to the biographer, died as a result of his devotion to the bodies he not only anatomized but kept at home. From such proximities, Vasari sought to distance himself. Likewise, even as formally trained anatomists like Vesalius professed to violent desires, historiographic circumspection has tended to follow.[2] San Juan challenges the obfuscation of violence within the history of art and the history of science. "The transition from [anatomical] table to anatomical image", she writes, "always entailed the attempt to negotiate the site of violence" (p. 22). Violence at this threshold was an essential part of the picture. It remains one that we must continue to negotiate, verbally and visually. To this end, *Violence and the Genesis of the Anatomical Image* provides us with an incisive and illuminating guide.

Annibale Carracci's *Study for an Execution*, in which two men have been brought to the gallows, provides a daring place to begin. San Juan's initial object, that which frames her introduction and offers a theoretical grounding for the book as a whole, is *not* anatomical – at least not in the traditional sense. Rather, it pictures the frequent antecedent of anatomical practice: death by execution. Through careful analysis of the drawing, which was most likely completed by Carracci in Rome at the turn of the seventeenth century, San Juan articulates anatomy in an expanded field. The violence of anatomy does not begin with the corpse's dissection. (Nor does San Juan's text.) It starts, instead, with the still-breathing body.

With the inclusion of an anatomical table at right, the drawing gestures forwards. It alludes to further violence to come. The drawing also looks back – back to the time of the execution's unfolding. San Juan brilliantly foregrounds the drawing's filmic dimension, as if the two men on the gallows converge into one figure twice-captured, before and after execution. The artist watches on the viewer's side, while a crowd of passersby strain to see, heads branching out behind a wall. Spectatorship may be strained; but it belongs, the drawing suggests, *within* the image's pictorial borders. The soon-to-be-executed is *himself* made to spectate. He is forced to look upon a small devotional panel, or *tavoletta*, which Carracci renders with a few gestures and which San Juan connects to the remarkable panels

2
There are major exceptions upon which San Juan builds. The work of Katharine Park, cited throughout San Juan's text, appears fundamental. See Park, The Criminal and the Saintly Body. Autopsy and Dissection in Renaissance Italy, in: *Renaissance Quarterly* 47/1, 1994, 1–33; and *Secrets of Women. Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection*, New York 2006.

still extant in Rome's Archconfraternity of San Giovanni Decollato. In its exchange of violence and vision, capital punishment and corporeal knowledge, the Carracci drawing thematizes a broader issue at stake for the author: namely, the extent to which the *medical* anatomical image existed in dialogue with images of bodily violence writ large.

San Juan proceeds, then, to widen the frame of anatomy itself, moving from the spectacle of public punishment to the violence enacted or imagined through images of martyrdom and cannibalism in Europe and its colonies. The frame expands over five chapters. The first two center on anatomical prints, beginning with Andreas Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica* (*On the Composition of the Human Body*, 1542) and followed by Juan de Valverde de Amusco's *Historia de la composición del cuerpo humano* (*History of the Composition of the Human Body*, 1556). The third turns, boldly, to the cannibal as the "anatomical body's troubling double", and one that, in its doubling, challenges fixity in any singular cultural or geographical context. Expanding upon her work on early modern mobility within *Vertiginous Mirrors. The Animation of the Visual Image and Early Modern Travel* (Manchester 2011), the chapter reflects on the formation of European anatomy in dialogue with new forms of knowledge and cultural exchange.

The fourth and fifth chapters shift from the two-dimensional print to the three-dimensional model. San Juan first analyzes Gaetano Zumbo's wax head and Anna Morandi Manzolini's wax self-portrait. Through them, she considers the extent to which matter could substitute – and violence, transform – corporeal forms and processes (p. 32). The fifth chapter turns to Bologna's Institute of Sciences and the first full-scale anatomy cabinet of wax models installed in the 1740s. Here, the threshold returns in its most incisive, and reflexive, form: as wax models appear to perform their own dissection besides a model of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise. Through a reparative reading of the Fall, San Juan argues for Eve's anatomical primacy.

The interrogation of images as dimensional objects remains central throughout. Indeed, the dimensionality of the body of artwork *and* the body of anatomical knowledge assert their mutual presence as the book's constant. Violence, San Juan makes clear, emerges through and upon the body. It emerges in relation to the material formats through which the body may be imag(in)ed and via the effects of those images upon beholders. Such anatomical images remain emphatically affective. While San Juan does not engage directly with the literature on pain, her book may well be read in concert with landmark texts in the history of emotion and of pain specifically, such as Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* and Javier Moscoso's *Pain. A Cultural History*.[3]

[3] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford 1988; Javier Moscoso, *Pain. A Cultural History*, transl. by Sarah Thomas and Paul House, Basingstoke/New York 2012.

San Juan aims to widen the anatomical lens and give images their full due. It is worth bearing in mind that the history of anatomy has prioritized an "iconographic" approach to its objects – reflecting anatomists' identification and labeling of parts. Contrary to claims made against surgical practitioners, anatomy conceived itself as a highly literary discipline. As Andrea Carlino emphasizes in *Books of the Body*, anatomists' reverence for classical texts reinforced their disciplinary positioning within natural philosophy.[4] In *Forbidden Knowledge*, Hannah Marcus has further emphasized the iteration of anatomical knowledge through texts read, censored, and rewritten – often by other physicians.[5]

On one end, then, the anatomical table could be taken for "a table", that is reduced through words to tabulation. Barthélémy Cabrol's *Alphabet anatomic* (*Anatomical Alphabet*) of 1594 illuminates this disciplinary impulse. A surgeon based in Montpellier, Cabrol had written an immensely popular book (eleven editions published in the seventeenth century) within which a series of tables graphically condensed the parts of the anatomized body. A prefatory encomium made explicit the value of such a work for its readers: "Ce qu'observe Cabrol de ses doigts très-experts, / Au plus beau bâtiment de tout cet univers, / En ce qu'il a réduit l'anatomie en table."[6] The anatomized body appears "reduced" or "redirected". The praise speaks volumes. For the anatomist's authority emerges in accordance with the body's conformity: the extent to which the body may itself be anatomized through print and into table and text. The analyses of both Vesalius's and Valverde's anatomical images resist reduction by graph and letter. Pain is part of that resistance, since it is "in the representation of pain", as Moscoso argues, "that the emotional and epistemic meet".[7] San Juan permits images the capacity to "perform" – to reflect upon and to interrogate – anatomy itself.

Emphasizing transformation – animation, in the case of Vesalius's bones, skulls, and skeletons; mutation, in the case of Valverde's muscle, flesh, and blood – San Juan allows the anatomical print to breathe once more. The print's complexity as a material artifact comes to parallel the anatomist's perception of the body itself. The body's perceived finality (its death) turned increasingly tenuous in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It was the very

4
Andrea Carlino, *Books of the Body. Anatomical Ritual and Renaissance Learning*, transl. by John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi, Chicago 1999.

5
Hannah Marcus, *Forbidden Knowledge. Medicine, Science, and Censorship in Early Modern Italy*, Chicago 2020.

6
"For Cabrol observes with his very expert fingers, / in the most beautiful structure of the entire universe, / the anatomy which he reduced into a table." Barthélemy Cabrol, *Alphabet anatomic*, Lyon 1594, xii.

7
Moscoso, Pain, 19.

separation of the body that increasingly suggested the possibilities of its (re)assemblage.[8] Likewise, fragmentation is not an end, but manifests as a beginning. Reflecting upon Vesalius's *Skeletons*, San Juan emphasizes such images' capacity to project through emotion the possibility of an after-, or artificial, life. Made ever more malleable in print, bone could wallow in instability. Where the force of anatomical alteration appears foregrounded, as in the *Skeletal Figure Hanging from Rope*, the figure continues to create an "illusion of generating new life from death" (p. 57). Far from static, this skeleton screams.

San Juan's approach to Valverde provides an enlightening reevaluation of the Spaniard's anatomical project. The breadth of scholars has continued to foreclose Valverde's work as derivative. San Juan, however, reveals his careful engagement and conscientious remediation of the Vesalian oeuvre in material and somatic terms. Valverde himself insisted upon medium specificity, comparing the "affordances" of his copper engravings to Vesalius's woodcuts. Like the transformation of images across media, the body's structure becomes liable to change. For Valverde, San Juan insists, "bodily sensation, especially pain, is part of a body that bleeds, digests, expels, feels and perceives" (p. 66). Drawing upon a broad critical apparatus – Agamben, Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari, among others – this chapter charts a path towards the pictorialization of sensation itself.

Transformation and transit remain dominant themes within the analysis of the "cannibal image". While the chapter turns to anatomy in the "New" World, the image remains a predominantly European one – centered upon Theodor de Bry's volumes on America and, in particular, on images of Brazil's Tupinamba. San Juan describes the cannibal image as one of concatenation as multiple bodies are brought together. The very figure of the cannibal becomes the anatomist's double: Vesalius's instructions for the preparation of a skeleton, by boiling, come to parallel de Bry's scene of Tupinamba women preparing soup. The images themselves provoke questions of commensuration between the cannibal/anatomist.

Turning to the wax models of Zumbo and Morandi, the question of commensuration becomes one of material similitude. How, and to what extent, could an anatomical image stand in for its model? Artistic and anatomical experiments begin to dramatically intersect with the preparation of living bodies and wax injection. Wax, what Georges Didi-Huberman has called "the material of all resemblances", emblematizes anatomy's threshold state.[9] In Zumbo's wax head, the separation between face and flesh, between

[8] Joan Landes, 'The Anatomy of Artificial Life.' An Eighteenth-Century Perspective, in: Jessica Riskin (ed.), *Genesis Redux. Essays in the History and Philosophy of Artificial Life*, Chicago 2007, 96–116.

[9] Georges Didi-Huberman, Wax Flesh, Vicious Circles, in: Museo La Specola Florence (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Anatomica. A Complete Collection of Anatomical Waxes*, Cologne/London/Madrid/New York/Paris/Tokyo 1999, 64–74, here 64.

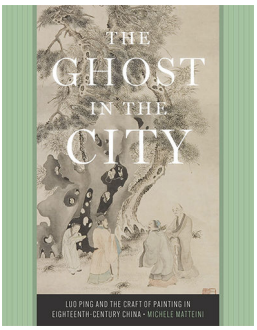
anatomical knowledge and corporeal sensation, appears actively undone (p. 137). Likewise, Morandi's *Model of Touch* emphasizes a similarly "unbreakable enfolding" as wax hands touch wax flesh – and dissection dissects itself.

In the final chapter, the anatomical threshold receives extensive analysis through the figure of Eve. The female wax model, San Juan argues, turns away from potential perfection and towards everyday life and death. Here, concepts of Eve's postlapsarian status – philosophical, theoretical, medical – lead to a powerful distinction. If the "fragmented body divests itself of embodiment through violence to reveal the force and animation of the body's structure, the natural body reveals violence within internal mechanisms that constantly confront pain, deterioration, and death" (p. 162). Eve's formation from Adam's rib offered an essential challenge and provocation to early modern anatomists. For the anatomical image which suggested the possibilities of the body's de- and re-formation is gendered feminine. "The female wax model", San Juan concludes, does not merely resemble but is "a placeholder for the future changes of anatomical knowledge" (p. 184).

Violence and the Genesis of the Anatomical Image will be essential reading for historians of art and science, as well as historians of gender, religion, and the emotions. In its exhilarating breadth and its acute observations, San Juan's most recent book will, I suspect, set forth increasingly interdisciplinary approaches to early modern anatomy – approaches in which the threshold, wherein violence and its effects appear, will no longer be off-center.

MICHELE MATTEINI, *THE GHOST IN THE CITY. LUO PING AND THE CRAFT OF PAINTING IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CHINA*

Seattle: University of Washington Press 2023, 248 pages with 68 color and 27 b/w ill. and 2 maps, ISBN 978-0-2957-5095-8 (Hardback).



Reviewed by
Kathleen M. Ryor

Within scholarship in the field of Chinese art history, studies of the arts of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) have been significantly influenced by the advent of the New Qing history in the 1990s, which expanded the scope of inquiry to forms of artistic production that had been excluded from earlier narratives that were centrally concerned with artistic innovation and quality, particularly in the medium of painting. Despite the publication of groundbreaking monographs on Qing art history over the last two decades,[1] in his introduction to *The Ghost in the City. Luo Ping and the Craft of Painting in Eighteenth Century China*, Michele Matteini observes that "the frameworks of the New Qing history – synthetic identity

1
See Patricia Berger, *Empire of Emptiness. Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China*, Honolulu 2003; Claudia Brown, *Great Qing. Painting in China 1644–1911*, Seattle 2014; Yee-wan Koon, *A Defiant Brush. Su Renshan and the Politics of Painting in Early 19th Century China*, Honolulu 2014; Kristina Kleutgen, *Imperial Illusions. Crossing Pictorial Boundaries in the Qing Palace*, Seattle 2015; and Stephen Whiteman, *Where Dragon Veins Meet. The Kangxi Emperor and His Estate at Rehe*, Seattle 2020.

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formation, cosmopolitanism, the redrawing of public and private spheres – are, however, most generally applied to the study of those who were more directly involved in the creations of a collective Qing identity and its state- and empire-building agenda" (p. 10).[2] In contrast, in *The Ghost in the City*, Matteini deftly integrates the story of one artistic luminary of the second half of the eighteenth century, Luo Ping (1733–1799), one of the so-called Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, with larger issues of ethnic, cultural, and regional identity. In this project, the author examines art production and patronage in Beijing outside of the court, as well as literati culture outside of the Jiangnan centers such as Yangzhou. It focuses on groups of works by Luo Ping executed at various times between 1772 and 1799, a period in which ink painting has been assessed as moribund at worst and irrelevant at best. This assessment derives from larger historical narratives influenced by modern, Eurocentric notions of "progress" in which innovation and rejection of the past are the key criteria for determining the significance of art works. While Luo Ping has long been viewed as exceptional due to his innovative and diverse painting styles, his oeuvre has nonetheless been primarily situated in relation to the so-called Yangzhou eccentrics of the previous generation. By using the painter's experience of sojourning in the capital city of Beijing as its theme, *The Ghost in the City* challenges the way we think about cultural "centers" in China during the Qing dynasty through its demonstration of how regional identity was enacted at the capital and in a space that was both segregated and a place where diverse actors across social and ethnic lines came together. While historians have explored the importance of the Southern City, the section of Beijing south of the Imperial City in which the local non-bannermen population had to reside and where its distinctly interregional character made it the social and cultural center of the capital,[3] Matteini breaks new ground when he explores the world of the diverse independent artists like Luo Ping who were professionally and intellectually connected to the leading high officials of the time.

Matteini opens *The Ghost in the City* with the handscroll, *In the Realm of the Ghosts* (ca. 1766), Luo Ping's most famous work from earlier in his career, whose colophons map out the painter's entrée into the world of elite ethnically Han men residing in the capital, especially in the Southern City. With *In the Realm of the Ghosts*, the author also sets out a metaphor for understanding the painting of Luo's late period, in which "fictionality [...] was not set in opposition to a presumed more authentic reality lying behind it, nor was it understood exclusively as deceptive and illusory. At the same

[2] Some recent exceptions to this include Koon, A Defiant Brush, and Michael J. Hatch, *Networks of Touch. A Tactile History of Chinese Art, 1790–1840*, University Park, PA 2024.

[3] For example, see Benjamin Elman, *Classicism, Politics and Kinship. The Ch'ang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley, CA 1990, and Ori Sela, *China's Philological Turn. Scholars, Textualism, and the Dao in the Eighteenth Century*, New York 2018.

time, fictionality was not completely disengaged from reality, or "autonomous"" (p. 8). *In the Realm of the Ghosts* was acknowledged as a plausible depiction of the subject by its colophon writers, even though some expressed doubt about the existence of ghosts. Like Luo's painting of ghosts, the author sets the stage for his subsequent revelation of how social identities and painterly and poetic codes informed an artistic process that transformed uncertainty and disjunction into narrative or pictorial strategies. In his reconstruction of Luo's extended social and professional world in the Southern City, the cast of characters is large; however, Matteini creatively structures the main part of his study through four separate but overlapping themes that also center on an important patron of Luo Ping – the Han bannermen Faššan and Ingliyan in Chapters 1 and 2, the Hanlin Academician, Weng Fanggang in Chapter 3, and the private secretary Zhang Daowo in Chapter 4. The four chapters also resonate with each other in various ways that integrate Matteini's major points across the entire monograph. Throughout his analysis, Luo's dual engagement with ancient and recent histories is revealed, as well as the strategies that both artist and patron used to express a viewpoint and identity specific to the group of individual sojourners in the artist's network.

Chapter 1, "The Dream of the Southern City", sets the stage for Luo's artistic practice in the capital by describing the geography of the Southern City and how Luo Ping's representations of it express specific conditions of the social relations among Luo Ping's patrons and larger professional circle. While the author situates such paintings within the longer tradition of depicting the real and imagined spaces of scholars' urban retreats and other sites of literati gatherings, he convincingly demonstrates how the artist transformed such imagery into expressions of a specifically Qing dynasty history that linked Kangxi-era scholars and their activities to those of Luo's world a few generations later. Ultimately Matteini illustrates how the artist created an iconography of the Southern City that integrated the imagined, allusive, and realistic depictions of sociality. He analyzes the various ways in which Luo Ping and other artists enacted group relationships through their painted images. The author ends with a masterful comparison of the earlier court painting, *The Hanlin Academy* (1744–1745), with Luo's late work, *The Yingzhou Pavilion* (1794), which exemplifies the type of visual topography of Beijing connecting a community of like-minded individuals which was created by Luo Ping and other ink painters.

The author shifts perspective from the primacy of the space of the Southern City as a gathering place for sojourners to a sojourner's negotiation and deployment of regional identity in Chapter 2, "Luo Ping from Yangzhou". To this end, he engages with Luo Ping's relationship to the history of painting in which the artist's works that explicitly engage past masters' styles reimagine that history, creating a process of appropriation as well as estrangement. Matteini contends that Luo capitalized on the vast cultural repertoire that was the "South" in the imagination of the late imperial period.

Luo's identity as a painter from the southern city of Yangzhou was promoted at the capital for his patrons such as the Han bannerman Ingliyan (1707–1783), for whom he did the album, *Landscapes in the Manner of Old Masters* (1772), which is the central work analyzed in this chapter. The author elegantly demonstrates how Luo's painting process engaged with more recent artistic masters as models for emulation, valuing the recent over the distant past. He connects this directly to the concept of "modeling oneself after later kings", which was articulated by the influential poet, calligrapher, and fellow denizen of the Southern City, Wang Wenzhi (1730–1802). Through Luo's choice of the painter Shitao (1642–1707) and his teacher Jin Nong (1687–1763) as "Later Kings", he established a specifically Yangzhou genealogy of landscape painting that positioned Yangzhou at the center of the changing artistic geography of the Qing, and Luo himself as a producer and product of "Southern-ness".

If Luo Ping's relationship with Ingliyan was manifest in the space of landscape paintings in which the artist and patron could imaginatively project and confirm common cultural and social values, a different manifestation of cultural and social values is seen in Luo's figure paintings executed for arguably his most important patron and friend, Weng Fanggang (1733–1818). In Chapter 3, "Textures of *Samsara*", Matteini explores Weng's close connection to a famous figure of the past, Su Shi (1037–1101), through the Buddhist concept of rebirth. Too often the identification with figures from the past by literati is viewed as cliched posing that merely signals erudition, social status, or cultural refinement; however, the author vividly demonstrates the meaning that such a perceived connection had for the literati who inhabited the Southern City. Weng was a leading authority on the Song dynasty poet and calligrapher and was an avid collector of objects related to Su Shi and his circle, but his commitment to Su's legacy took on dimensions that went beyond most common forms of scholars' obsession for a past figure. The author argues that Luo Ping's images of Su Shi engaged the notion of reincarnation and granted access to a deeper and more consequential truth. Matteini specifically connects *Su Shi and the Two Miao* (1795) and *The Su Studio* (1780) to Su Shi's and Weng Fanggang's concerns with self-representation. Luo's images of the Song dynasty poet for Weng joined the two men but underscored differences as well. By comparing and contrasting Luo's paintings with the works of other painters who depict sitters in the guise of historical and Buddhist figures, Matteini reveals that Luo enabled a form of identification that rejected perfect correspondence while also refusing the theatricality of an artist like Chen Hongshou (1598–1652), whose portraits depicted the subject as someone temporarily taking on the guise of a past figure.

The final chapter, "Landscapes of Culture", focuses on a single work, *The Sword Terrace* (1794), and links this landscape painting of a specific location in Sichuan Province to contemporary political events. Matteini also investigates how Han cultural identity and history are intertwined with the history of painting. He sketches

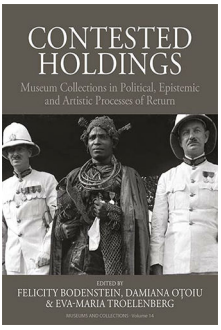
the biographies of the people who convened around the production of the work and argues that in the painting, Luo imagines the vast extent of the empire by referencing and reassembling poetic depictions of Sichuan Province with a range of pictorial sources. Revisiting one of the foundational myths of literati identity, the donkey rider, and one of the poetic touchstones of literary history, the Road to Shu, Matteini demonstrates that *The Sword Terrace* became meaningful to its audience because it suggested an alternative to disenchantment and self-parody. By recuperating the lore of Shu and the donkey rider and modeling it after the lived experience of one member of Luo's Southern City circle, the painting's inscribers suggested that if there was to be a return to the values that this lore embodies, it had to begin from the interpersonal bonds of those who identified with each other as a community. The author deftly weaves an analysis of Luo's painting with past imagery of both themes and effectively contrasts *The Sword Terrace* with images of Shu produced by the imperial court that promoted Qing military victories in Sichuan. This contrast highlights the vastly different agendas behind the use of the same repertoire of literary and pictorial depictions of the Sword Terrace and the Road to Shu.

While there have been several major studies of Luo Ping's career,[4] *The Ghost in the City. Luo Ping and the Craft of Painting in Eighteenth Century China* not only illuminates the artist's production during his three periods in Beijing but more broadly provides a nuanced and thought-provoking picture of the world of elite Han identity during the late eighteenth century. In this picture, Matteini challenges persistent art historical taxonomies that continue to categorize the production of painting and art patronage in terms of binaries such as court versus literati, metropolitan versus regional, orthodox versus "eccentric". Ultimately this is a book about how cultural identity for those educated elite who sojourned in the Southern City was expressed through ink painting and how "the "crisis" of the late eighteenth century was [...] not one of disenchantment and demise but of regained confidence in imagination and the potential of words and images to turn imagination into reality" (p. 181). Matteini's work is a major contribution to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to significantly reframe how the art of this period is studied.

[4] For monograph-length studies, see Chen Jinling, *Luo Liangfeng*, Shanghai 1981; Kim Karlsson, *Luo Ping. The Life, Career and Art of an Eighteenth-Century Chinese Painter*, Zurich 2004; and Kim Karlsson, Alfreda Murck, and Michele Matteini (eds.), *Eccentric Visions. The Worlds of Luo Ping (1733–1799)*, Zurich 2009.

FELICITY BODENSTEIN, DAMIANA OŢOIU, AND EVA-MARIA TROELENBERG (EDS.), *CONTESTED HOLDINGS. MUSEUM COLLECTIONS IN POLITICAL, EPISTEMIC AND ARTISTIC PROCESSES OF RETURN*

New York/Oxford: Berghahn 2022, 306 pages with 16 ill., ISBN: 978-1-80073-423-4 (Hardcover).



Reviewed by
Zainabu Jallo

The volume *Contested Holdings. Museum Collections in Political, Epistemic and Artistic Processes of Return* contributes to the enduring discussions surrounding the snarl in which museums holding queried material culture find themselves. The 360-page book emphasizes the importance of addressing historical injustices and unethical practices within these institutions, highlighting the need to implement efficient and effective resolutions. *Contested Holdings* explores various geographical locations and contexts. With twelve chapters, this publication provides a polymathic range towards understanding the diverse occurrences of contested collections and the repatriation of human remains across five continents. This includes the examination of constitutional frameworks, knowledge systems, and the artistic aspects of ongoing contestations and prospective returns. The editors' deliberate decision to employ the phrase "contested holdings" in place of "heritage" and "return" instead of "restitution" aligns with Piotr Bienkowski's elucidation

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of "return", which encompasses two distinct actions: restitution, which pertains to the return of items to their rightful owners based on property rights, and repatriation, which involves "a return of items to their country or sub-state group based on ethical considerations".[1] Additionally, the editors reference Jeanette Greenfield's inclination towards using the term "return" to encompass a wide range of case studies and diplomatic legal actions that may result in either restitution or repatriation (p. 1). This decision capably captures the complexity and specificity of the cases presented throughout the book.

Structured into four thematic sections, *Contested Holdings* is organized as follows: "Transitioning from Objects to People. Investigating Ways of Life and Loss", "Investigating the Idea of Return. Connecting Artefacts and Bodies", "Establishing Regulations. Discussing Politics and Museum Ethics", and "Returns That Are Incomplete and Interrupted". The publication's editors deserve commendation for the meticulously structured framework that enables a smooth transition from one topic to another, guaranteeing a coherent presentation of various arguments. Despite unavoidable overlaps, this careful arrangement significantly improves the overall reading experience. Although these section headings provide a broad overview of the content, this review offers more granular analyses of individual articles within these themes.

I. From Objects Back to People. Ways of Life and Loss

This section spotlights the aftermath of the Second World War, a critical period confronting the historical injustices surrounding Nazi-looted art and its repatriation. Ulrike Sass's contribution shows how these artistic possessions were once regarded as mere objects but are now recognized for their pivotal role in safeguarding lives. It underscores the importance of acknowledging the intrinsic value of these masterpieces to both the victims from whom they were cruelly snatched and those who perpetrated the act. The chapter accentuates how the meticulous documentation of history can significantly contribute to comprehending the circumstances surrounding their acquisition. Within the scope of negotiations pertaining to Nazi-looted art, Sass effectively demonstrates the significance of having a comprehensive understanding of the interventions involved, as confiscation is intrinsically intertwined with the notions of restoration and reparation. By examining various cases of barter trade involving humans and art, Sass explores the historical precedent of hostage-taking and the devaluation of human life as a mere commodity. The appalling public exhibition of the deprivation of rights inflicted upon Jewish individuals during the era of National

[1] See Piotr Bienkowski, A Critique of Museum Restitution and Repatriation Practices, in: Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy (eds.), *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, vol. 3, Chichester 2015, 431–453.

Socialism brings forth a heightened awareness of the clandestine exchange of artworks for human lives, which can be perceived as a distinct form of ransom and extortion.

In a different scenario, Ewa Manikowska utilizes the Gwoździec synagogue replica in the Museum of History of Polish Jews as a case study to explore strategies for coping with the loss of traditional Jewish ways of life within a museum setting. According to Manikowska, the museum itself carries the tragic history of the Holocaust, and the synagogue replica goes beyond being a mere faithful reconstruction of a specific structure. It also symbolizes the revival of European Jewish heritage and the Jewish community, made possible through the tangible remnants of culture. Manikowska highlights the significance of Eastern European synagogues, particularly those built with wood, as potent symbols in the ongoing process of rehabilitating and reconstructing Jewish culture since the aftermath of the Second World War. This chapter underscores the importance of material culture in facilitating the reconstruction of Jewish heritage and exemplifies a museum's role in cultural rehabilitation and reconstruction processes.

Ruth E. Iskin's contribution highlights the latent limitations of relying solely on a postcolonial perspective in negotiations about restitution, as it risks overlooking a more comprehensive understanding of the object's history and the complexities surrounding its ownership. This approach tends to disregard the inimitable circumstances of dispossession and fails to acknowledge the various forms of appropriation. Iskin follows the life of the *Nefertiti* bust, beginning at the point of its excavation in 1912 and extending to its current controversial existence in Germany. The controversies surrounding the bust have sparked an artistic intervention by Nora Al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles, resulting in the creation of *The Other Nefertiti*, a provocative gesture that revitalizes the polemic surrounding the original bust. Here, the potency of contemporary art in engaging with this discourse on restitution in a stimulating manner, both digitally and materially, is illustrated. The utilization of art in the digital age to establish a distinctive intervention in the discourse surrounding restitution presents "a series of symbolic acts, [and] this intervention not only contests colonial cultural dispossession, but it also symbolically enacts a repossession" (p. 75). By conjoining restitution politics with internet activism, the symbolic value of the original masterpiece through three-dimensional replicas is effectively harnessed, thereby raising pertinent questions about the contemporary geopolitics of cultural ownership from a postcolonial standpoint.

II. The Subject of Return. Between Artefacts and Bodies

Recently, a significant amount of attention has been allotted to the debate surrounding the boundaries between museum specimens and human individual bodies. The fate of old physical anthropologi-

cal collections created by racial anthropologists and phrenologists for their scientific projects continues to be critically scrutinized. These collections are mostly now considered outdated and potentially harmful in representing specific individuals or groups. As a result, there are growing debates regarding who has the legal rights to keep these collections. Noémie Étienne highlights the growing discomfort associated with displaying life casts in museums through the examination of specific instances where life casts were used to construct life-size dioramas, raising questions about how the provenance of such collections can be remedied. The status of live casts and their moulds as scientific artefacts containing traces of human DNA should be worrying as "some plaster moulds literally include human remains" (p. 88). Through the analyses of the works of anthropologist Arthur C. Parker and sculptor Casper Mayer, Étienne stresses that "the context of violence, domination and colonization in which most casts in anthropological enterprises of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were produced is often visible in the cast themselves" (p. 91).

In a similar vein, Christopher Sommer conducts a thorough examination of the repatriated life cast of Māori chief Takatahara at the Akaroa Museum, a biography that sheds light on the chief's story and brings together its various encounters such as displaying the life cast amongst artefacts from different periods and origins, thereby ascribing it another context. Questions of how and when these live casts make their way back to the communities of the indigenous population studied by phrenologists in the nineteenth century emerge. While dioramas undoubtedly provide a distinctive approach to captivate viewers and deepen their comprehension of a specific subject by immersing them in a scaled-down world, they have gained notoriety for depicting indigenous peoples in unfavourable infrahuman portrayals. As per Sommer's analysis,

> given that dioramas are a common way of representing animals in the Natural History collections, this could even have suggested a zoo environment, with the representation of Maori restrained behind a barrier and expected to perform his daily deeds for the pleasure of the curious onlooker (p. 103).

To honour the historical significance of dioramas while avoiding any potential offence, it is requisite to explore alternative symbolic representations, as suggested by Étienne. We must acknowledge that presenting scenarios and objects in vitrines can unintentionally create a sense of otherness. It is imperative to discover non-offensive formats that effectively convey the historical value of these dioramas.

An elemental aspect of this section involves the ethical considerations surrounding museums' possession of human remains that are considered ancestors by the communities from which they originated. One notable instance is the Pitt Rivers Museum, which,

despite repatriating Aboriginal Ancestral Remains, continued to retain the Ngarrindjeri Old people, symbolically "represented as drinking vessels" (p. 124). What is most urgent is addressing the ethical implications of preserving and displaying these human remains. Persuasively, the contributors illustrate the imperative to strike a delicate balance between honouring the scientific advancements of the past and respecting the dignity and rights of those whose remains are held within museum collections.

III. "The Making of Law". Politics and Museum Ethics

The chapters in this section are connected by an exploration of museum ethics in relation to various requests for the return of human remains and objects from colonial collections, such as those tied to the complex and aggressive history of Belgian-Congolese relations, characterized by ambiguity and conflict. Placide Mumbembele Sanger illustrates the highly politicized litigation against Belgium for Congolese objects in the Museum of Tervuren, highlighting why the Tervuren collections are significant in this renowned legal battle. Sanger accentuates the importance of the Congolese people rediscovering their past and asserting their identity, describing the collection not only as a representation of

> a sumptuous and impressive royal palace; [but] also a great 'cemetery' where the masterpieces of our ancestors, torn from their environment and diverted from their function, are buried. Desacralized, they have become mere objects of curiosity, reduced to the role of consumer goods (p. 158).

The ensuing chapter offers a peek into how French museums tackle (or at least attempt to tackle) the troublesome issue of human remains and the legal and moral considerations surrounding their repatriation. According to Cristina Golomoz, the history of repatriation claims involving human remains from French museums demonstrates that the legal classification of these remains is not fixed. Instead, it fluctuates between two perspectives. On the one hand, human remains can be seen as objects that can be owned and are protected by property laws. On the other, human remains can be understood in relation to the human body they once belonged to. An illustrative case is that of Saartjie Baartman, whose remains were returned from France to South Africa in 2002 after a lengthy legal process. Damiana Oţoiu also examines the Baartman case from the perspective of South Africa, providing an overview of legal classifications of human remains and their significance in diplomatic relations concerning repatriation.

The presence of human remains in museums brings to light the intricate relationship between cultural property law, ethical principles, and the evolving perceptions regarding the dignity of these artefacts. The contributions demonstrate the intricate web

that museum professionals must navigate when managing their collections, balancing the demands of cultural property law and moral responsibilities in the face of repatriation claims. In addition, this section also focuses on scientific racism linked to the significance of physical anthropology collections, which have long served as repositories for human remains considered scientific specimens. However, as examined in the preceding section, ancestral remains are now acknowledged as concrete traces that unveil narratives of colonial viciousness and the objectification of indigenous populations by racial anthropologists. This cannot be over-flogged.

IV. Partial and Paused Returns

The previous sections presented numerous examples of returns or requests that were either compelled or coerced as a result of various legal conflicts. Interestingly, the opening chapter in this section delves deeper into the past, specifically on the Counter-Reformation era of sixteenth-century Rome. During this time, the Catholic Church faced challenges and implemented a series of reforms to restore its influence and authority. One individual who played a significant role in this period was Francesco Gualdi, who actively contributed to the restoration efforts by returning objects from his collection to "loca sacra", where they could be admired as expressions of faith. Fabricio Federici argues that Gualdi's decision to restore these objects to churches and public spaces was motivated by various factors, including his ambition for self-promotion and desire for recognition. This inclination towards self-promotion was not unique to Gualdi, as many benefactors during that era shared similar motivations. Consequently, Gualdi took great care to ensure that his name was prominently displayed on the pieces that he returned, thereby solidifying his legacy, and leaving a lasting mark on these objects. While it may be temporally separated from other entries in the volume, this specific contribution presents a viewpoint from a private holder rather than an institutional one.

Within Chapter 11, Felicity Bodenstein's contribution brings valuable insights into the fervent political and legal debates surrounding the repatriation of Benin bronzes to Nigeria. By focusing on the art market, the establishment of national collections, and the concept of heritage in Benin and Lagos, this chapter adds depth to the extant controversies.[2] Bodenstein unravels the labyrinthine history surrounding the calls for the return of the looted Benin artefacts during the punitive expedition by British naval forces in 1897. A staggering 5,246 objects from this plunder are currently dispersed

[2] Substantiating contributions are Dan Hicks, *Brutish Museums. The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*, London 2020; Barnaby Phillips, *Loot. Britain and the Benin Bronzes*, London 2022.

among 131 institutions, excluding those held privately.[3] The chapter sheds light on the complex interplay between actors in Benin and the national efforts to seek restitution during the colonial and postcolonial periods. Throughout, various endeavours are traced, including diplomatic appeals between governments, repurchasing private collections for the state, and appealing to the voluntary willingness of holders to restore these objects to Nigeria. The contribution also highlights the significant rise in the monetary value of Benin objects, which has hindered the return efforts. Beyond their cultural and spiritual significance, these objects have gained immense value in the "tribal art" market, fetching some of the highest prices ever recorded internationally for African artefacts (p. 238).

Carrying on with cases of loot acquired from warfare, Erin Thompson's inquiry into the legal and political consequences of artefacts trapped in transitional phases during military conflicts adds substantially to the discourse.[4] The effort to repatriate archaeological discoveries to Iraq and Syria reveals the convoluted legal jurisdiction that operates domestically within the United States and internationally. This section stands as a testament to the numerous obstacles surrounding objects confiscated from dealers or illicit sales, many of which were initially circulated through networks affiliated with ISIS. Thompson's investigation particularly highlights the contrasting treatment of artefacts believed to have originated from Iraq as opposed to those likely originating from Syrian territory, underscoring how prevailing political dynamics can supersede established legal norms.

While *Contested Holdings* aims to present a comprehensive portrayal of disputed holdings, it is understandable that due to the sheer volume of cases worldwide, certain regions did not make it into the compilation – perhaps in a subsequent volume. The absence of previously colonized areas like South America and Asia, where the illicit transfer of cultural artefacts and human remains was prevalent and continues to be entangled in various restitution cases, is notable. As an anthropologist, I am aware of the dangers of historical repetition, imbalanced power dynamics, and the significance of facilitating "intercultural translation", collaboration, and productive dialogue between different forms of knowledge. Therefore, spotting indigenous Ngarrinjeri elders, Major Sumner and Loretta Sumner,

3 It is important to note that these figures are based on the declarations made by institutions on the *Digital Benin* platform, and there may be additional artefacts yet to be accounted for (23 January 2024).

4 Benjamin Isakhan and James Barry, Iraqi and Syrian Responses to Heritage Destruction Under the Islamic State. Genocide, Displacement, Reconstruction, and Return, in: José Antonio González Zarandona, Emma Cunliffe, and Melathi Saladin (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Heritage Destruction*, London 2023, 322–332; Helga Turku, *The Destruction of Cultural Property as a Weapon of War. Isis in Syria and Iraq*, London 2018.

as co-authors of Chapter 6 titled "Ancestor or Artefacts", was gratifying. In this context, intercultural translation acts as a catalyst for initiating and facilitating the exchange of challenges and uncertainties, ultimately leading to the discovery of hidden knowledge within indigenous contexts and a profound understanding of the intricate dynamics of power. This is a noteworthy highlight.

As institutions supposedly dedicated to cultivating intellectual development and promoting cross-cultural exchange, museums with contested holdings reflect the colonial past and the intricate dynamics of cultural maltreatment and "cultural haemorrhaging"[5] that unveils the unsettling reality of the political dimensions of power and authority within these museums. Hence, this publication further substantiates the intensifying evidence that such museums have caused harm (and continue to cause harm) to various societies and individuals by monopolizing and claiming ownership of their alleged knowledge repositories, often misrepresenting the histories, traditions, and unique attributes of diverse communities.

Contested Holdings makes a refreshing and invaluable contribution to the rolling discussions surrounding restitution and reparations. The editors have successively produced a comprehensive and invaluable resource – a volume anchored to the sturdy groundwork of the contributors' meticulous and exhaustive research.

[5] Folarin Shyllon, Unraveling History. Return of African Cultural Objects Repatriated and Looted in Colonial Times, in: James A. R. Nafziger and Ann M. Nicgorski (eds.), *Cultural Heritage Issues. The Legacy of Conquest, Colonization and Commerce*, Leiden/Boston 2010, 159–168.

BRIANNE COHEN, *DON'T LOOK AWAY. ART, NONVIOLENCE, AND PREVENTIVE PUBLICS IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE*

Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press 2023, 272 pages with 22 color and 23 b/w ill., ISBN 978-1-4780-1946-6 (Paperback).

Reviewed by
Sara Blaylock

While democracy is predicated on an ideal of equal access to the mechanisms of political action, specifically the public sphere, in practice this falls gravely short for many populations. This is particularly true in the European Union where precarious populations have ascended in numbers even as the expansion of a democratic vision based on multinational cooperation, free trade, and flexible movement for European citizens has come to fruition in the EU's unified project. The ideals of a representational democracy, and specifically its enactment in public spaces where discourse is a means to representation, are unavailable to people with contingent status – from asylum seekers to climate refugees to migrant laborers.

Brianne Cohen engages the issue of precarious publics in her highly focused study of art and politics. Through the work of the German filmmaker Harun Farocki, Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, and the art collective Henry VIII's Wives, *Don't Look Away* explores the contours of an existential problem of our time, namely the impossibility of traditional conceptions of political life to adequately defend, support, or enfranchise vulnerable populations. While clearly outlining the ways in which Europe's consensus-based

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democracy is premised in an ethic of inclusivity and accountability, Cohen likewise demonstrates that Europe's insistence on universal values have produced a culture of fear and defensiveness supported by the structural violence of securitarian states that atomize, rather than unify, Europe's increasingly heterogeneous publics. To take one example, Cohen describes how surveillance systems have come to dominate the priorities of government, and have taken the place of more careful attention to financing and administering institutions that support social welfare.

Don't Look Away embraces an optimistic ethos grounded in the practical. Cohen defends art as both a reflector and driver of possibility. As she writes in her introduction "the following chapters aim to elaborate how both embodied and mass mediated artworks may actively envision a more democratic social imaginary built on plurality and nonviolence" (p. 28). In contrast to art activism, which prioritizes direct action, the case studies of *Don't Look Away* are drawn from artistic practices that aspire to less obvious outcomes. Cohen remains "committed to redefending the imaginative, poetic, often more elusive potential of art in changing mindsets and resisting violence" (p. 8).

Importantly, Cohen's book reveals that the problem of political ineffectiveness for Europe's disenfranchised populations is also a problem for those who *do* have a place at the table of democracy. Here Arjun Appadurai's notion of the "minoritarian" affords Cohen's analysis some weight. As she writes in her conclusion, the sidelining of Europe's minority publics within European societies reveals the "vulnerability that majoritarian publics feel, upended by a feeling of little or no control over larger political and economic events and outcomes" (p. 181). As Appadurai writes, "Minorities, in a word, are metaphors and reminders of the betrayal of the classical national project" (cited in Cohen p. 181). Who is actually winning in this limited framework of political agency?

Many of Cohen's case studies include artworks that pointedly make specific groups visible, from the Romani people exterminated by the Nazis at the center of Farocki's film *Respite* (2007) to the Muslim residents in an Amsterdam neighborhood renarrativized in Hirschhorn's *Biljmer-Spinoza Festival* (2009) to Henry VIII's Wives' reenactments of iconic geopolitical scenes with white pensioners (e.g., *Assassination of a Viet Cong*, 1999). Within these artworks is a clear attention to the accountability of the majority white, Christian, and able-bodied population histories that have brought them to a limited conception of the public sphere, a view that likewise constrains the definition of citizenship.

Cohen's dexterous and dialogical use of a few core thinkers of geopolitics – Appadurai, as well as Hannah Arendt and Judith Butler – is supported by her attention to the role that visual representation can play to extend equality. The scholar and curator Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's idea of the "civil gaze" in particular, reinforces the book's central focus on art. Azoulay identifies the visual as both the means and the assertion of the social and political needs

of the marginalized subject. She argues that although by necessity originating in private, the "political imagination" of marginalized populations must become civil, that is to say, it needs to assert itself in public life. "In other words," Cohen writes, "imagination must be communicated in order to foster public discourse and transformation" (p. 41). Writing through the lens of artwork examples made by white European artists, Cohen engages Azoulay as a way to emphasize how the work of artists like Farocki, Hirschhorn, and Henry VIII's Wives reimagines political equality, arguing that this is not only their task but the obligation of their primary audience of art consumers, which is typically white, educated, and politically enfranchised.

Cohen's chapter on the filmmaker Harun Farocki centers on the challenges that the Information Age poses to an empowered citizenry. In its opening pages she writes, "It is the flood of images, or raw data, that has increasingly characterized and tested contemporary society, and galvanized Farocki's practice" (p. 61). She continues to explain, "In generating numerous observational films, in utilizing an ethnographic lens, and in reframing found footage, Farocki questions a contemporary public's ability to navigate such an information-saturated world" (p. 61). Farocki's 2007 film *Respite* draws attention to this data glut through the Holocaust, the narratives of which formed a central part of Germany's post-Nazi recovery. The film repurposes the ninety minutes of raw footage shot in May 1944 by Jewish prisoner Rudolf Breslauer at the Westerbork transit camp in Northeastern Holland. Farocki's edit highlights the experience of transportation, and emphasizes the transition periods, that is to say the dehumanizing qualities of a group of physically and psychologically abused inmates as they await their movement to concentration camps. Cohen attends to the repetition and focus of Farocki's forensic, which is to say investigative, use of the found footage. In *Respite*, the artist isolates particular details "in order to bring new information to light and to thread it to future knowledge of the concentration camps", the details of which – she writes elsewhere – have been "relegated as old history for many a younger generation in Europe" (pp. 65–66). Farocki summons a well-understood collective memory in Germany to urge a rehumanization, or to think with Azoulay, "to rehabilitate one's citizenship or that of someone else who has been stripped of it" (cited in Cohen p. 68). For Cohen *Respite* excels in its recognition of "the plurality of the camera's operations", from the photographer to the photographed, from the context of its making to the accidental records it contains, including, for instance, the face of a Sinti girl named Stella Steinbach. Farocki includes a statistic that reveals that over one-third of people deported from Westerbork to Auschwitz in May 1944 were Roma and Sinti. The Romani experience in the Holocaust has not been a primary focus of the narrative of grief and trauma surrounding the Nazi genocide. Cohen interprets the significance of the repeated image of Steinbach as centralizing "a question of the historical and contemporary vulnerability of Romani peoples" (p. 74). This representation of Romani

genocide underscores the hostility they face, and suggests that their continued absence from the German public sphere is a problem of a lopsided approach to the post-WW2 conception of citizenship.

One of the strengths of *Don't Look Away* is Cohen's articulation of the ways in which majority/status quo populations are complicit in the asymmetries of political power that prevent a more equal world. Cohen relies on the foundational definitions of the public sphere afforded by Hannah Arendt, specifically how access to public life is a prerequisite to political agency. Thinking through *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Cohen writes

> political affiliations are meant to safeguard rights of equality against a tremendous background of real, disquieting human differentiation [...] without a political umbrella in the first half of the twentieth century, without concrete ties to a specific state, minorities, refugees, and asylum seekers paradoxically lost the most abstract right to have rights in the first place (p. 21).

In short, according to Arendt, totalitarianism's establishment of a system of classification for its own purposes of exclusion was absorbed into the post-WW2 world in which refugees and asylum seekers were welcomed into western Europe.

Cohen addresses the significance of an unequal form of civic life through a critical review of the installations of Thomas Hirschhorn. To take one example, a so-called neighborhood sculpture like 2002's *Bataille Monument*, installed in a largely working-class Turkish German area north of Kassel for *Documenta 11* was accused of having been "calculated to incite controversy" (p. 95). Critics maintained that the artist's choice of the surrealist philosopher Georges Bataille was arbitrary; some even suggested Hirschhorn had installed his project in a neighborhood of some of Germany's least empowered workers to exploit cheap labor. Writing in defense of Hirschhorn, though still from a critical distance and even at a remove from her previously published analyses of his work, Cohen writes that the artist's neighborhood sculptures produce ambiguity and bring that nuance to spaces that have otherwise been reduced to narratives of despair. In *Don't Look Away*, Cohen sees Hirschhorn employing imagination and uncertainty through "creative processes of self-reflexive public formation" (p. 97). To this end, and through other projects by Hirschhorn that were less firmly rooted to spaces inhabited by marginalized communities, Cohen suggests that Hirschhorn is less interested in community than he is in the way publics are formed. In short, he is looking to estrange his audience, rather than to find commonality, and in the process of estrangement produce relationality among strangers. That relation is public, not collective. In *Swiss-Swiss Democracy* (2004), for example, Hirschhorn employs common consumer goods, like packaging tape and cardboard, with slogans employed by his homeland to celebrate their robust economy. The project exaggerates and makes strange

the coherence of Switzerland's national identity. Surrounded by a mountain landscape also constructed of tape and cardboard and set to life with a model train looping through its tunnels, an assembly of chairs and couches installed within the banked seating of an auditorium summons to mind the parliament where Switzerland's isolationist policies are decided and defended. "Additionally," Cohen writes, "the three predominant colors on the walls – pastel blue, yellow, and pink – also territorialized and satirized the space as Swiss" (p. 108). The parody is both well-suited and ironic. Installed in the Centre Culturel Suisse in Paris, the work monumentalizes Switzerland's lauded cultural and economic capacity, but calls these achievements into question through an excess of cheap materials. After all, these are the materials that build an encampment and not an economy. *Swiss-Swiss Democracy* has a nightmarish quality typical of Hirschhorn's institutional works, and thus brings to light the critiques of idealization that center his neighborhood installations. These are not works of social practice, but rather of social agony.

In her final case study chapter, Cohen turns to the largely unfamiliar Henry VIII's Wives as an example of how collective authorship and mass identification come into contact in contemporary art. Active from 1997 to 2014, the members of Henry VIII's Wives (Bob Grieve, Rachel Dagnall, Sirko Knüpfer, Simon Polli, Per Sander, and Lucy Skaer) first met at the Glasgow School of Art, and collaborated from locations across western Europe after graduating. Their irreverent and utopian practice often centered on reconstructing or refashioning recognizable icons of modern European history. One of the better known works, *Tatlin's Tower and the World* (2005–2014), for example, aimed to construct the never realized Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1919–1920) in pieces around the world. The project at once embraced this symbol of unification as one that could consolidate a globalized post-Communist world, while at the same time offered a reminder of the failure to build a globalized and Communist world. *Tatlin's Tower and the World* took on greater significance in 2009 when Henry VIII's Wives led a farcical campaign to request permission from the Swiss population to build the structure in Bern. This campaign coincided with a national referendum that ultimately banned the construction of minarets in the Swiss landscape. As Cohen describes it,

> Henry VIII's Wives suggested the construction of the *Monument for the Third International* to Bern citizens in order to query a set of issues related to public fears of cultural difference, slow violence, and how to effectively build a space for productive stranger relations again after traumatic, spectacular events such as 9/11 (p. 164).

The Tatlin project's presumptive failure to enter the landscape is, for Cohen, a metaphor for the populism that dominates European political discourse, specifically its efforts to homogenize a public based on a vague set of core European values. "Populism", she

writes, "operates chiefly by its sheer vagueness and emotional resonance" (p. 168).

> More than a parody, however, *Tatlin's Tower and the World* was also a campaign to counter through contretemps a visual field exploited by demagogues to propagate a clash-of-civilizations mentality and to spread fears, for example, of immigrants and Muslims (p. 168).

Of course, that a monument to Communism would pacify a right-wing, neoliberal, and anti-immigrant community is absurdist. To Cohen, however, the efforts of Henry VIII's Wives served to draw attention to the reductive quality of alt-right cultural artifacts.

In her conclusion, Cohen engages the global response to 2015's Charlie Hebdo attack, a horrific event that pitted the dignity of Islam violently against the European value of free speech. The response – a slogan-based campaign that brought *Je suis Charlie* signs across western European media for months – sidelined a nuanced discussion and encapsulates Cohen's larger point about the urgent need for greater subtlety as an antidote to the oppositional logics of contemporary Europe. Cohen's conclusion reinforces this noble cause of bridging social divisions: "Art can have a critical role to play not only in challenging injurious public discourse but also in actively reconceiving the groundwork of more ethically self-reflexive, pluralistic public spheres" (p. 179). These assertions are well-articulated when taken as imperatives, that is to say, as directives and as identifications or, to think with the biological construction of contemporary nation-state power offered by Appadurai, as diagnoses of a systems problem. In this regard, Cohen's book is extremely convincing. There is a clear disconnect between what European Union nation-state democracy purports to be doing and what it is actually doing. (It bears mentioning that Cohen devotes a significant amount of her first chapter, which frames her later analyses of art in discussions of the public sphere, to a careful articulation of the foundations of the EU project.) Yet, *Don't Look Away* leaves me wondering how these artists bring disenfranchised publics to their art. And, what about the right-wing populations who so clearly need a little more nuance in their understanding of Europe's precarious publics, whose numbers are ever ascending? Put another way, I am uncertain as to whether the artworks Cohen describes will actually have impact on mindsets that urgently need to be impacted.

Cohen's book has not convinced me that the artists of her study are preventing something, or that the audiences they produce (their publics) are preventive. It has convinced me that art, when taken as a speech act, does much to articulate the ways in which ideals of political agency have historically subordinated groups into classifications of vulnerability, precarity, and marginality in ways that are reinforced and repeated in a "complex of visuality" (to think with

Nicholas Mirzoeff) that has naturalized a definition of citizenry that is decades out of date.[1] As Cohen writes,

> Whereas Mirzoeff's notion of visuality assumes a kind of intentionality behind the disciplinary actions of classification, segregation, and aestheticization [...] securitarian publics are dangerous precisely due to their lack of any centralizing self-reflection or self-realization (p. 69).

The center of power today is held by fear, insecurity, and suspicion.

To this end, I praise Cohen for returning to a few key phrases that do much to identify the problem of Europe (really a problem of geopolitics today), writ large. She borrows the term "slow violence" from the eco-theorist Rob Nixon, which identifies "aggressions that are slower, more habitual, or historically sedimented" (pp. 15–16). The concept, to which she returns often, is also wed to Ann Laura Stoler's idea of duress which describes Europe's structural violence as perpetrated by "differentially distributed futures" (p. 16). Slow violence helps to establish the primacy of her title phrase "preventive publics", which articulates a contradiction in contemporary politics within the roles that state-based vs citizen-led publics play in the maintenance of a safe and secure society. On the one hand, in the "Age of Terror" the nation-state makes decisions based on a need to protect populations in the aggregate. On the other hand, the idea of a "preventive public" reveals the need for a population – in this case its artists – to articulate, reject, and confront the ways that securitarian governance limits the emergence of certain publics. Cohen's related term "slow violence" thus likewise describes the impacts of a surveillance system, or a nation-state that finds no political place for the migrants upon whom its sense of self (let alone its economy) nevertheless depends. This raises parallels between the historical cases of structural violence (i.e., colonialism) and the contemporary ones (i.e., intergenerational poverty) that are the legacies of colonialism.

Understanding *Don't Look Away* as a kind of essay – which is to say as an attempt – that explores a problem rather than resolves it allows its rhetorical strategy to come into focus. Cohen (let alone these artists) cannot solve the problems of citizenship, political agency, and public life that trouble our world, but she (they) can specify its origins and reveal its contours through material examples. *Don't Look Away* is an attempt at identifying a phenomenon and its structural conditions. Taken another way, it is a catalog of artworks that identifies a turn in contemporary European art that does not want to avoid (i.e., to look away from) the foundational problems of our time. If the foundations of a post-totalitarian democracy that form the premise for the unified nation-state project that is the European Union are today untenable in the face

[1] Cohen engages Mirzoeff briefly in her chapter on Farocki. See page 69.

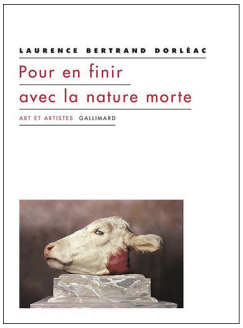
of a catastrophic twenty-first century, then the vision of a global culture itself needs to be reimagined. The book is a medium for thinking through these issues. The art is a way of finding the community – a social relation – that may, perhaps, someday not only demonstrate but drive the alternatives these artists have long-since revealed as necessary.

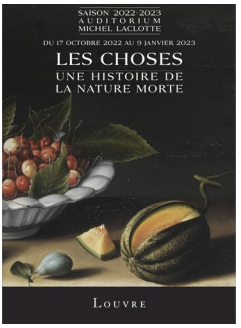
ON THINGS (AND THEIR REPRESENTATION)

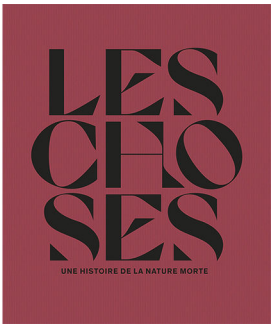
Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte*, Collection Arts et Artistes, Paris: Gallimard 2020, 376 pages with ill., ISBN 978-2-072-88609-6 (Paperback).

Les Choses. Une histoire de la nature morte, exhibition curated by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, Musée du Louvre, Paris, 12 October 2022–23 January 2023.

Les Choses. Une histoire de la nature morte (exh. cat. Paris, Musée du Louvre), ed. by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, with the collaboration of Thibault Boulvain and Dimitri Salmon, Paris: Lienart/Musée du Louvre éditions 2022, 448 pages with 240 ill., ISBN 978-2-359-06383-7 (Paperback).







Reviewed by
Stefano de Bosio

Words can both make visible and conceive. Still life, as well as its French (imperfect) equivalent, *nature morte*, has been the prevailing filter through which Western culture has referred – at least since the seventeenth century – to the depiction of "things", be they natural, such as flowers, fruits, and animals, or human-made. In an ambitious intellectual project, art historian Laurence Bertrand Dorléac offers a fresh reassessment of what is at stake in looking at still lifes and their established narratives of silence, immobility, and death in an era – ours – marked by ubiquitous consumerism, impending environmental crisis, and the ongoing rethinking of the

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human relation with other species. The author, professor of art history at the Institut d'études politiques in Paris, has deployed her investigation into a book, published by Gallimard, an exhibition, held at the Louvre Museum, and in its corresponding catalogue. As in a multifaceted prism, the same concerns appear refracted in each of these outcomes with some different emphases and nuances.

The first to be published, the book *Pour en finir avec la nature morte* (*The End of Still Life* would be a fairly free translation) stems from the author's impatience with the French trope of *nature morte*, seen as "une expression fâcheuse [qui] ne rende nullement justice à tout ce que recouvrent les choses représentées, qui ne sont ni mortes, ni mineures, ni innocents".[1] As Théophile Thoré wrote in the mid-nineteenth century: "Nature morte est absurde [:] tout communique avec tout et participe à la vie solidaire. Il n'y a pas de nature morte."[2] In the *Prologue*, Betrand Dorléac situates her project at the crossroad of the current renewed interest in things, their status, and patterns of interaction with humans. From philosophy to anthropology, from semiology to material culture, the reflection on things and objects (and the often-blurred lines between these concepts) has brought forward multiple ways for dealing with the excess of meaning that they are able to enhance. Like things themselves, "l'art agit largement autant sur le monde et sur nous que le contraire": by studying the different articulations and bias of the genre of still life, the aim is thus "de reposer la question du statut des choses et donc du notre".[3]

The reader soon finds the reference and homage to Charles Sterling, author of the pioneering 1953 Paris exhibition *La Nature Morte* at the *Orangerie* in the Tuileries Gardens, which was followed by a book of the same name.[4] But the intentions behind the two projects are different: whereas Sterling argued for the primary role played by fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian art in the rediscovery of the Graeco-Roman engagement with the depiction of things, Bertrand Dorléac advocates for a more extensive consideration of other cultural traditions and historical trajectories. This is reflected in the book in the early chapters devoted to the representation of objects in prehistoric times and in ancient civilizations, from Mesopotamia to Egypt, as well as in the pages devoted to

1
Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte*, Paris 2020, 20 ("an unfortunate expression [which] does no justice to all that is involved in the things depicted, which are neither dead, nor minors, nor innocents"; all translations into English by the author of this review).

2
Théophile Thoré, *Musées de Hollande*, Paris 1860 ("Still life is nonsense[:] everything communicates with everything else and participates in a shared life. There is no *nature morte*"), quoted in Bertrand Dorléac, Pour en finir, 271, n. 1.

3
Bertrand Dorléac, Pour en finir, 7 ("art has as much effect on the world and on us as the other way round"; "to revisit the question of the status of things, and therefore our own").

4
Charles Sterling, *La nature morte. De l'antiquité à nos jours*, Paris 1959.

Chinese depictions of objects. At the same time, Bertrand Dorléac is particularly interested in the complex interplay and dialogue between contemporary art and the history of the portrayal of things. This is undoubtedly the most characteristic of the critical choices made by the author, whose intention to revisit the still life genre and its very premises occurs "à la lumière de notre sensibilité actuelle".[5] Reproduced on the cover of the book [Fig. 1], Andres Serrano's *Cabeza de Vaca* (1984) highlights one of the vital cores of this reflection: the conflictual status between thing and non-human being that the animal has held in the history of still life and the ongoing contemporary treatment of it. The vitriolic yet seemingly still-pulsating eye makes Serrano's decapitated cow a modern-day Medusa capable of paralysing viewers by interrogating their own condition. Bertrand Dorléac combines this inquiry into the animal question with an exploration of artists' confrontations with the shifting boundaries between the living and the inanimate. As well, she focuses on artmakers' ways of coping with the proliferation of things and objects since the early modern period, pointing to the various forms of their creative appropriation, which became particularly challenging in times of their (industrial) standardization.

The Louvre's exhibition *Les Choses. Une histoire de la nature morte* took place, as has been customary for the museum's shows since the 1990s, in the underground spaces near the Pei Pyramid. The exhibition display was designed by Guicciardini & Magni Architetti, who in recent years have been responsible for the remarkable renovation of the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Pisa. While they managed to break the monotony of this hypogeal location (severely constrained by the narrow corridors that link two larger exhibition areas), a certain lack of space was felt in more than one part of the exhibition, due both to the number of works on display and to the large attendance that characterizes most Louvre shows.

Divided into fifteen sections, the exhibition drew on the extraordinary collections of the Louvre Museum, intelligently integrated with loans from more than seventy institutions and private collections. The sections, each revolving around a topic, followed a loose chronological order, from antiquity to the present day. But just like in the book, the inclusion of contemporary artworks punctuated each section, at the same time amplifying and challenging visual and symbolic narratives brought forward by historical works. Such a transhistorical dialogue started from the very first room, whose title *Ce qui reste* (Remains) advocated the intertwining of the "petits restes de l'histoire individuelle et collective",[6] and the dialogical mirroring of past and present. Encompassing sculptures, paintings,

5
Bertrand Dorléac, Pour en finir, 11 ("in the light of our present-day sensibility").

6
Les Choses. Une histoire de la nature morte (exh. cat. Paris, Musée du Louvre), ed. by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, Paris 2022, 36 ("small remains of individual and collective stories").

LAURENCE BERTRAND DORLÉAC

Pour en finir
avec la nature morte

ART ET ARTISTES GALLIMARD

[Fig. 1]
Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte*, Paris 2020.

photographs, assemblages, and videos – a curatorial stance informing the exhibition as a whole – the room spanned Neolithic artefacts to Mesopotamian and Egyptian bas-reliefs depicting offerings to the dead, to Christian Boltanski's spectral visual inventories of things, to a sequence from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), where objects seem to be moved by the power of thought. Rooms devoted to "l'art des choses" in classical antiquity,[7] its supposed eclipses during the Middle Ages, and then resurgence in the fifteenth century, were followed by sections devoted to the "nouveau statut en majesté [qui] s'impose pour les choses ordinaires".[8] The section *Accumulation, échange, marché, pillage* (Accumulation, exchange, trade and pillage) looked at the emergence of the still life as a genre during the early modern period, while Errò's gigantic *Foodscape* (1964) rendered in a modern supermarket-like setting the panoply of goods thematized by the three market scenes by Joachim Beuckelaer on display (1568–1570). Sam Taylor-Johnson's video *Still Life* (2001) pitilessly portrayed the physical decline of a basket of fruits (or rather their constant mutation of states), providing a compelling commentary in the *vanitas* mode to the apparent perfection – at times metaphysical, as in Juan Sànchez Cotan's *Window, Fruits and Vegetables* (ca. 1602) – that the rendering of things often enjoyed between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, at the height of the Western still life tradition.

The room titled *La bête humaine* (The human beast) featured Serrano's *Cabeza de vaca*, here involved in a close visual dialogue – among the most intense in the exhibition – with works by Zurbarán, Rembrandt, Goya, Géricault, Courbet, and Buffet. Located at about the middle of the exhibition and emphasized by the choice of black for the walls, this section echoed the assumptions of the closing chapter of Bertrand Dorléac's book, entitled *Cas de conscience* (A case of conscience).[9] From Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* (1655), in which the quartered animal is exposed to the beholder in all its visual salience, to Goya's *Still Life of a Lamb's Head and Flanks*, and Courbet's depictions of dead trout (1872–1873), these works question today's viewers for their empathetic rendering of dead animals and their latent humanity. In a twist of sorts, Géricault's *Study of Limbs of Human Corpses* (1818–1819) pointed instead to the latent thingness of the human body. An admirer of Chardin, who featured in the exhibition with such important works as *La Tabagie* and *A Rabbit, Two Thrushes, and Some Straw on a Stone Table* (ca. 1755), Edouard Manet claimed to want to become the "Saint Francis of still life", pursuing simplicity in his way of painting things. The intense wall dedicated to Manet in the section *La vie simple* (The simple life)

7
Les Choses. Une histoire, 50.

8
Ibid., 74 ("the new centrality given to ordinary things").

9
Bertrand Dorléac, Pour en finir, 201–252.

assembled works that appear as a testament of this desire to "établir un régime d'égalité entre les choses ordinaires et les êtres".[10]

The last rooms, dedicated to the art of the twentieth century and the new millennium, were characterized by spaces gradually increasing in size and volume, as well as being provided with brighter lighting. These sections dealt with themes ranging from the modern incommunicability between things and humans, as in De Chirico's *Mélancolie d'un après-midi* (1917), with the two artichokes towering over an urban landscape, to the conflicting stances of (industrial) alienation and re-enchantment of the object, as in Duchamp's Ready-Made, where the serialized object is appropriated by the artist. While the section *Choses humaines* (Human things) offered a detour into the liminal ontological status of dolls and puppets, *Métamorphoses*, the last section of the exhibition, explored the "uncertainty" – both visual and ethical – characterizing the renderings of things in contemporary arts.[11] At a time when beings and things are increasingly hybridized, the show closed with a photograph of a blurred, fading bouquet of flowers by Nan Goldin, taken during the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, paired with the final sequence of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970), where the cloud-like explosion of material goods powerfully embodies "le dynamitage des fétiches de l'Amerique du capital".[12] Antonioni's excerpt was also looped on two huge symmetrical screens in the entrance hall of the exhibition. This last circumstance did not fail, in its own way, to give regular Louvre visitors pause for reflection about the "power" of things, since this now empty area usually housed the stand with exhibition-related merchandising – this time positioned more discreetly along the corridor connecting with the *Pyramide*.

The catalogue of the exhibition, in addition to the curator's introductory essay, the short texts introducing the different sections and the entries on the works of art, presents in its second half, with a play on words, what is called *le chosier*.[13] In this things' thing more than fifty authors – art and literary historians, philosophers, archaeologists, anthropologists, and sociologists, economists, and poets as well as artists and a botanist – have selected a "thing" each, and wandered through its multiple aesthetic, economic, political, cultural, emotional, etc. values and meanings. Their picks range from cotton to yo-yo, from egg to pillow, to the Internet of Things, giving birth to a list worthy of Francis Ponge's poems or Georges Perec's *objectographie* – both among the curator's favourite references. This collective outcome, which bears the trace of the seminar

10
Ibid., 170 ("to establish a system of equality between ordinary things and beings").

11
Ibid., 250.

12
Ibid., 276 (entry by Thomas Ait Kaci), "the blasting of America's capitalistic fetishes".

13
Ibid., 282–440.

on things that Bertrand Dorléac held since 2015 at Sciences Po, is a testament to the metaphorical power of the object, and its role as a springboard for the imagination.

In its unbridled freedom and diversity of themes and approaches, the *chosier* also offers a kind of counter-project to the exploration of objects and still lifes in Bertrand Dorléac's book and exhibition. Through its joyous and often unpredictable selection, the *chosier* frees itself from the pull exerted by still life as a genre and its interpretive traditions. It ultimately addresses what looks like one major, although almost subterranean, question of Betrand Dorléac's project: what does the act of representation do to things? Indeed, the reader finds the term representation throughout the book and the catalogue, yet it remains, together with its theoretical thickness, in the background (representation is not mentioned, for example, in the book's thematic index). In this respect, moving away from *nature morte* as a trope seems less important than historically and culturally situating the ways in which still life as a genre has helped to frame the codes and regimes of representation of things and objects within Western art, and beyond. Even the linguistic shifts between silence, immobility, and death as characterized by Germanic and neo-Latin languages – still life vs *nature morte* – is like the tip of the iceberg of wider semantic transformations that, in Western culture, have taken place since the late Middle Ages, affecting the very definition and cultural agenda informing the depictions of things. As such, the genre and theme of the still life appear enmeshed in the tension between the richness and diversity of practices, and the often-schematic nature of the discourses which have been held about them. Bertrand Dorléac's multifaceted and sensitive treatment of the place of things in contemporary art convincingly shows, especially with her choice of including different forms of sculpture and assemblages, the potential of a narrative different from the one informing the tradition of the Western (painted) genre of still life. Following such an inclusive approach, however, might have led to consider further in the project aspects like the Western Middle Ages' lure of things and objects. Practices such as the inexhaustible experimentation with books' jewelled covers – a testament to the centrality of the book as a medium in monotheisms – or the highly refined framing of objects and human remains staged in Christian reliquaries, could then stand among the junctures in a medieval history of the (re)presentation of things.

Taking seriously the challenge raised by *Pour en finir avec la nature morte* also means looking for paradigms other than those of silence, immobility, or death traditionally mobilized in relation to the object and its representation. The trope of metamorphosis chosen by Bertrand Dorléac as the title for the last section of the exhibition makes it possible, for example, not only to address, as the author does, the theme of "uncertainty" and instability (aesthetic, political, ethical...) that are characteristics of many outcomes of contemporary art. It also brings to the fore the broader imbrications of subject and object, nature and culture that run throughout Western

culture. While *la nature mourante*, as we could call in French the representation of nature in a time of environmental crisis, reveals in its change of temporal tense the unexpected relevance of the despised *nature morte* trope, the *nature morte vivante*, to borrow the title of the 1956 canvas by Salvador Dali,[14] stands for the premises and promises of *natura naturans*. With their interpolation of natural and artificial, Mannerist as well as Baroque precious mounts of shells, pearls, and corals are among the possible manifestations of such understanding of things-in-the-making. Drawing attention to these kinds of artefacts – clearly outside the Western narratives of still life – is one of the fruitful steps that can be taken to broaden further the discussion of the history of things and their regimes of visual representation.

[14] The painting was displayed in section *Selectioner, collectioner, classer*: Les Choses. Une histoire, 105 (entry by William Jeffett).

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