Transculturation and Contemporary Artistic Collaboration: Pushing the Boundaries of Histories, Epistemologies, and Ethics

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Collaboration is fundamental to and characteristic of many artistic endeavors not only in our contemporary, technologically wired, and heavily mediated times, but it has also marked artistic practices throughout the ages and in many places of the world. Indeed, we might argue that artworks—whatever shape they might take—more often than not come into being by many hands and more than one (master) mind. Still, the notion of the singular (white, male) genius who fathers and authoritatively signs a masterpiece continues to inform art historical narratives, to serve as a strong identitarian figure in the art market, and to haunt curatorial and collecting practices.

Post-colonial, feminist, queer, indigenous, and network theory discourses have successfully questioned this notion in the last decades, while artists have begun to take collaboration more seriously. Scholarly discussion about collaborative practices in the arts and visual culture has increased accordingly. This increased interest in collaboration is often attributed to economic factors, media technologies, and socio-political aspects of globalization, as globalization since the 1990s has re-charged and re-shaped the long-standing trend to work together across national borders and societal boundaries that—to a certain degree—already characterized modernist artist groups at the end of the nineteenth century. Although historically perspectivized studies that address "alternative modernities," "cosmopolitan modernisms," or "multi-centered modernisms" have greatly contributed to our understanding of the transnational and transcultural networks and agents who facilitated the circulation of artistic knowledge and works across increasingly interconnected art scenes far beyond Europe or North America, they tend only to mention

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collaboration, not to foreground it.[1] Such studies deemphasize collaborative practices in order to include individual artists or works that have been ignored or purposefully excluded by a Eurocentric master narrative that privileges outstanding individuals over collaborative groups.

A valuable starting point from which to address this research gap are studies that focus on contemporary collaborative artistic practices that also pay attention to transculturation as informed by art history.[2] Such an approach integrates our present-day awareness of the urgency of creative collaboration in the face of multiple, complex crises spanning the globe, with explorations into the *longue durée* of the histories, epistemologies, and ethics that govern how we (have) work(ed) together, how we know and think about collaboration, and how and why we should (continue to) do so.

Accordingly, the present themed issue is an attempt to bring two strands of art related discourse more closely together: collaboration and transculturation. This issue looks into thematic overlaps, methodological resonances, and the connection of both in diverse practices. It verges on the banal to observe that collaborative practices lie at the heart of transculturation—here understood as a long-term, polyphonic, and multi-sited social process and complex dynamic that has marked modern art histories. But it is worth addressing the complex question of what this means when we aim to address art historical

1 See, for example, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Kobena Mercer, ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms: Annotating Art's Histories* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); Monica Juneja and Franziska Koch, "Series on Multi-Centred Modernisms: Introduction," in "Multi-Centered Modernisms: Reconfiguring Asian Art in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries," special issue, *Transcultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 38–41, https://doi.org/10.11588/ts.2010.1.6181.

2 Scholarship that engages with specific historical case studies is increasingly common. Examples include in Reiko Tomii, ed., "Collectivism in Twentieth-Century Japanese Art: A Special Issue," *Positions: Asia Critique* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2013); and the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) Zheng Bo, "Discovering Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China," *Future Learn*, accessed February 28, 2021, https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/socially-engaged-art. The aforementioned sources include transnational and transcultural perspectives, but do not make them their primary lens. On the other hand, *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism* has mapped contemporary collaborative practices across the world, although the focus of the journal is not on the cultural and art historical aspects of the *longues durées* that have informed the various sites under discussion. In an attempt to address specific art practices from the perspective of a globally informed art history, I co-organized the following seminar together with Birgit Hopfener: "How to Cut and Share the Global Pie: Transcultural Approaches to Collaboration, Participation, and Activism," co-organized by Franziska Koch and Birgit Hopfener, Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present, October 26–28, 2017, Oakland, California. Accessed February 28, 2021, http://www.network-transcultural.net/RNTP-Activities/Workshop-Dokumenta-14/Asap_9-Seminar_-Oktober_-2017.html. The expression "How to Cut and Share the Global Pie" is from Gerardo Mosquera, "From," in *Creolite and Creolization: Documenta 11_Platform3*, ed. Okwui Ewezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, and Octavio Zaya (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003): 145–148. See also Renate Dohmen, *Encounters Beyond the Gallery: Relational Aesthetics and Cultural Difference* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

and artistic "world-making" in ways that depart from the conflicted cultural, civic, regional, or national research containers and modernist conceptual categorizations built into the discipline.

This themed issue combines five ambitious case studies, all of which provide theoretical reflections and pose initial answers to the above question. Three of these contributions were part of the panel "How We Work Together: Ethics, Histories, and Epistemologies of Artistic Collaboration,"[3] which I organized to further a dynamic international discussion at the First TrACE Academy, "Worlding the Global: The Arts in an Age of Decolonization" (Ottawa, 2019). The regional contexts of these studies are varied and their subjects include artists working in or moving beyond the borders of Mexico, the United States of America, the People's Republic of China, Germany, and Japan during the last decade. The practices of these artists resonate with one another and pointedly question narrow national or cultural identifications. They all use collaborative modes as a method to relate and re-shape art concepts, aesthetics, and creative practices that tend to be viewed as separate, unique, authentic, or even ahistorical traits and truth-claims of particular communities, nations, or cultures. Further, all of the artists are part of an internationally informed, professionally trained, and increasingly mobile artistic community that pays attention to the social, political, and ecological urgencies of our times.

Artistic collaboration and transcultural perspectives

Issues of collaboration are particularly evident in the field of "socially engaged art," an umbrella term that describes "art that is collaborative, often participatory and involves people as the medium *or* material of the work."[4]

3 *Worlding the Global: The Arts in an Age of Decolonization* was the first international academy of the Transnational and Transcultural Art and Culture Exchange (TrACE), and was organized by Carleton University's Centre for Transnational Cultural Analysis (CTCA), Ottawa, November 8–10, 2019. The program for the panel can be viewed here: "How We Work Together: Ethics, Histories, and Epistemologies of Artistic Collaboration," *Centre for Transnational Cultural Analysis (CTCA),* accessed February 5, 2021, https://carleton.ca/ctca/partnerships-special-projects/trace-academy/worlding-the-global-ottawa/. The academy was the kick-off event for a series of three further academies to be organized by TrACE's Transatlantic Platform Project "Worlding the Global: The Arts and Social Innovation." On the platform see: "Worlding Public Cultures: The Arts and Social Innovation," *Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies*, accessed February 5, 2021, https://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php?id=5075. I would like to thank Birgit Hopfener, Ming Tiampo, and the whole team of the Ottawa Academy for their conceptual and organizational bravura, and I hope that this themed issue will help to extend the Academy's innovative intellectual impulse.

4 "Art Term: Socially Engaged Practice," *Tate*, accessed February 7, 2021, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/socially-engaged-practice. Tate's online dictionary—a practical, albeit brief introduction to the terminology—also relates the term with the partially overlapping meanings of "new genre public art," "community art," "activist art," and a more general "social turn." These terms have in common the fact that they are not only reflected by the arts, but are also practiced through them.

Such collaborative practices have been displayed in pioneering thematic exhibitions and affiliated events such as "Get Together" (Vienna 1999), [5] "Collaborative Practices in Contemporary Art" (London 2003), [6] "Kollektive Kreativität" (Kassel 2005), [7] "Living as Form" (New York 2011), [8] or the "Coop" Pavilion (2018) at the Bangkok Biennale.[9] However, the transcultural implications of a globalizing "participatory" or "collaborative" turn have only recently come under scrutiny.[10]

Grant Kester's monograph *The One and the Many* is an exemplary case in point. [11] Kester critically built on debates that took place in the 2010s, most prominently Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics"[12] and Claire Bishop's

5 Exhibition catalogue by Kunsthalle Wien, Konrad Becker, Karin Knorr-Cetina, and Peter Lewis, ed., *Get Together: Kunst als Teamwork* (Vienna: Folio, 1999).

6 International conference titled "Diffusion: Collaborative Practice in Contemporary Art," organized by John Roberts, Stephen Wright, and Dominic Willsdon and held at Tate Modern on Saturday, October 25, 2003; the conference papers were subsequently published in the special issue "Art and Collaboration" in the journal *Third Text* 18, no. 6 (2004), accessed February 2, 2021, https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ctte20/18/6?nav=tocList.

7 Exhibition catalog by Kunsthalle Kassel, René Block and Angelika Nollert, ed., *Kollektive Kreativität* (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2005).

8 Nato Thompson, ed., *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

9 COOP Pavilion at the Bangkok Biennale 2018, curated by Muriel Meyer.

10 On the participatory turn: Christian Kravagna, "Arbeit an der Gemeinschaft: Modelle partizipatorischer Praxis," in *Die Kunst des Öffentlichen: Projekte, Ideen, Stadtplanungsprozesse im politischen, sozialen, öffentlichen Raum*, ed. Marius Babias and Achim Könneke (Amsterdam: Verlag der Kunst, 1998), 28–47; English version published as Christian Kravagna, and Aileen Derieg, trans., "Working on the Community: Models of Participatory Practice," *Transversal Texts* 1 (1999), accessed February 1, 2021, https://transversal.at/transversal/1204/kravagna/en. On the collaborative turn: Maria Lind, "The Collaborative Turn," in *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, ed. Johanna Billing and Lars Nilssonszerk (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 15–31; Maria Lind, "Complications: On Collaboration, Agency and Contemporary Art," in *New Communities*, ed. Nina Möntmann (Toronto: The Power Plant and Public Books, 2009), 52–73.

11 Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). The book builds on Kester's earlier monograph, which primarily explored projects tied to European and North-American contexts, and artistic practices enabling social dialogues and processes of community building rather than aesthetic objects resulting from them. Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). Kester later founded *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism,* launched in 2015, which has become an influential platform for the on-going discussion of socially engaged art, with a focus on contemporary case studies that are increasingly global in scope, and is deliberately cross-disciplinary in its approach.

12 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods, and Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002). The original was published as Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998).

pointed critique of the same. Bourriaud singled out "relations" as characteristic of a participatory trend in the arts during the 1990s.[13] According to Bishop, however, Bourriaud failed to explain "how to evaluate … [such] relations as *art,*"[14] nor did he examine "the *quality* of the relationships in relational aesthetics."[15] When focusing on the political implications of the "social turn" in the arts, Bishop suggested a distinction between activist strategies that are not genuinely interested in art, and "aesthetic antagonism,"[16] which refers to works that deliberately create dissonance, subversion, and disruption by enacting the exploitive and dehumanizing relations marking our world.[17] Introducing to the debate case studies from the global South, Kester further unpacked and complicated the prevailing theoretical approaches.[18] Looking beyond the hegemony of the Western or Euro-American discourse and the ways in which it has (in)formed globalizing art scenes in many places around the world, Kester engaged with genealogies of social, communal, or participatory artistic engagement in sites that are deemed peripheral or marginal in the perception of the global North. Effectively, these case studies render visible the cultural particularities of Euro-American histories, epistemologies, and ethics of collaborative artistic production.

Kester's extended definition of what is to be named artistic practice therefore questions the very boundaries of the long-standing (modern) aesthetic definition of art with a capital *A*. Further, his definition subscribes to the aforementioned epistemologically informed theoretical critique of an art historiography that has taken this history as universal or as a universally applicable methodology, and thus uncritically perpetuates the colonial, imperial, civilizational, or national (self)understandings, institutional

13 Prominent artists who informed their discussion are Rikrit Tiravanija, Félix Gonzélez-Torres, Gabriel Orozco, Pierre Huyghe, Liam Gillick, and Maurizio Cattelan.

14 Jason Miller, "Activism vs. Antagonism: Socially Engaged Art from Bourriaud to Bishop and Beyond," in *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism* 3 (2016): 165–183; 166.

15 Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Autumn 2004): 51–79; 65.

16 Bishop bases her understanding of antagonism on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theory of subjectivity, which follows Marxist readings; see Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 65–70.

17 The latter is fostered by artists such as Santiago Sierra or Thomas Hirschhorn. Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," in *Artforum International* 44, no. 6 (2006): 178–183. Bishop published an anthology of foundational documents and exemplary artistic practices, which, however, primarily represent Western writings, artistic examples, and critiques of the discourse: Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel, 2006). Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

18 For a critical summary of the approaches that re-consider Bourriaud, Bishop, and Kester, see Jason Miller, "Activism vs. Antagonism," 165–184.

missions, and collecting frames that were built into the discipline at its inception in the nineteenth century. After an initial discussion of some already broadly acknowledged trend-setters of collaborative or collective contemporary art situated mostly in the global North, Kester presents little known contemporary projects—commonly characterized by what he calls "collaborative labor"[19]—by artists working in Myanmar, Senegal, Argentina, and Central India. Consequently, the structure of his book can be criticized as an additive approach that tries to account for the "global" by extending the canon to include examples from various peripheries.

This prompts the question: Are we still not able to narrate and conceive of an actually entangled globality beyond the paradigmatic dichotomies of "the West and the rest," "colonizers versus colonized," "North versus South" etc. that have governed art historical discourse? Arguably, it could have helped to dissolve the additive approach of Kester's book if he had emphasized historical, cultural, and discursive entanglements and networks that continue to connect what are often conceived to be mutually exclusive, disconnected, or distinct cultural spheres.[20] In fact, the most incisive part of Kester's monograph is his expert theoretical critique of the European universalism that underpins the paradigm of deconstructivism. He argues that this paradigm has pervaded the last decades of debate on socially engaged art practices, to the extent that we ignore the cultural and historical specificity of an originally French strand of aesthetic discourse. This discourse is increasingly taken as a universal,[21] though its philosophical tenets are by no means shared everywhere, nor are they reasonably applicable to art scenes and institutional settings that are differently constituted in both historical and intellectual terms.

Problematizing this methodological blind spot, along with its historical causes and epistemological effects, has been the hallmark of a transcultural

19 Kester defines collaborative labor as follows: "Several of the collaborative projects that I'll begin discussing … challenge this [deconstructivist] discursive system. They are … concerned with … durational interaction rather than rupture; they seek to openly problematize the authorial status of the artist, and they often rely on more conciliatory (and less custodial) strategies and relationships (both with their participants and with affiliated movements, disciplines, etc.). While they may be implicated in forms of collective action that take up an oppositional or antagonistic relationship to particular sites of power, they differentiate this antagonism from the modes of self-reflexive sociality necessary to create solidarity within a given organizational structure. In short, they challenge the conventional aesthetic autonomy of both the artist and art practice, relative to a given site, context, or constituency. It is this challenge, embodied in practice, which requires a new analytic approach." Grant Kester, *The One and the Many*, 65.

20 Since he is not an art historian with an area specialization for each of the places he discusses beyond European and North-American frames, it is understandable that Kester focuses on contemporary art, and misses the *longue durée* perspectives.

21 Kester, *The One and the Many,* 21–65.

approach to (global) art history and some—periodically more narrowly framed—transnational studies in the fields of art that became vocal only slightly later than the collaborative turn.[22] These approaches have as a common feature an emphasis on art history as a *modern* discipline that came into being in the age of (European) nation building and in contexts that saw (earlier) art objects, practices, and agents as circulating in an increasingly connected world marked by on-going colonialism and imperialism. However, the discipline's Eurocentric master narrative did not overtly figure the fact that artworks and artists were often subjected to or subjects of significant socio-political and economic power struggles and epistemic violence. That narrative continued to uncritically propagate a supposedly universal significance of enlightenment, progress, and originality. Consequently, as Monica Juneja has recently remarked, much scholarly work remains to be done:

> Art history as a form of world-making—of grappling with the past and of glimpsing the contours of emerging possibilities as embodied in art production—is dependent on the criticality of a transcultural approach to rethink its epistemic foundations. … It needs to move beyond studying connectivity or mobility or interaction per se … to grasp the intellectual gains that are secreted from the connectedness of cultures. … [It involves] paying attention to scale, to "anachronic" temporalities, to textures of affect, and to different modes of knowledge beyond that of our scholarship—the artistic, the everyday and non-professional—that might bring with them conflicting claims to authority.[23]

The five contributions to this themed issue answer this call by paying attention to different scales, temporalities, and "textures of affect," while exploring the transcultural processes that underlie various forms and levels of artistic collaboration that are marked by very different but globally entangled histories and particular epistemological challenges. These contributions

22 For example: Monica Juneja, "'A Very Civil Idea…': Art History, Transculturation and World-Making—With and Beyond the Nation," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 81, no. 4 (2018): 461–485; Monica Juneja, "Alternative, Peripheral or Cosmopolitan? Modernism as a Global Process," in "*Global Art History*": *Transkulturelle Verortungen von Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft*, ed. Julia Allerstorfer and Monika Leisch-Kiesl (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 79–108; Birgit Hopfener, Nanne Buurman, Barbara Lutz, and Sarah Dornhof, ed., *Situating Global Art: Topologies, Temporalities, Trajectories* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016); Piotr Piotrowski, "From Global to Alter-Globalist Art History," *Teksty Drugie (Special Issue—English Edition)* 1 (2015): 112–134; Aruna D'Souza, "Introduction," in *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn*, ed. J. H. Casid and Aruna D'Souza (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2014), vii–xxiii; Christian Kravgana, "Toward a Postcolonial Art History of Contact," *Texte zur Kunst* 91 (2013): 110–131.

23 Juneja, "'A Very Civil Idea…'," 480. "Anachronic temporalities" refers to Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 14.

ultimately query not only the ethos of the collaborators they describe, but also the disciplinary ethos informing the ways art historians address them.

Contributions

Katia Olalde's contribution "Stitching Critical Citizenship during Mexico's War on Drugs" addresses a collaborative visual protest designed to draw attention to the victims of the war on drugs. The project was a collaboration between amateur volunteer participants and professional artists, the latter conceiving the creative concept and guiding the participants. Olalde argues that when a participant stopped in Mexico City in 2011 to stitch information on a handkerchief about one of the innumerable persons violently killed by the "federal security strategy,"[24] and another participant joined later to complete the stitching, a simple but fundamental notion of community and citizenship was enacted in the face of a failing state. As Olalde describes, such an embodied collaboration, organized in a relay procedure, discourages singular authorship and ownership in favor of spontaneous, untrained, temporary, and equal participation, and in turn co-constitutes a commemorative and future-oriented intervention. This project is an attempt to re-claim public space and democratic discourse by literally materializing both the inconceivable and abstract number of lives lost, and modest ways that we (can) work together to "mend a social fabric" ruptured by violence, impunity, and mistrust.[25]

Such a focus on direct participation and the clear political purpose of these embroideries resonates with Kester's extended notion of socially engaged art, and invites comparisons with other collective forms of visual protest culture around the world. Olalde's discussion demonstrates the methodological benefit of joining the notion of socially engaged art together with an (art) historical expertise that allows her to delineate the underlying *longue durée*, regional situatedness, and the indigenous, colonial, and gender factors that underpin her contemporary case. She dismisses the presentism that informed the activists' counter-propagandist use of the metaphor of mending by critically exploring two "anchors of our [Mexican] sense of belonging and shared responsibility" and "the way these anchors inform the struggles of the citizenry to effectively exercise their democratic rights."[26]

The first of these anchors is an influential indigenous understanding of community and collaboration, which is not a closed issue of the pre-colonial past, but an active component of the indigenous modernity that also co-constitutes

24 Katia Olalde, "Stitching Critical Citizenship during Mexico's War on Drugs," in this issue, 19.

25 Olalde, "Stitching Critical Citizenship during Mexico's War on Drugs," 27.

26 Olalde, "Stitching Critical Citizenship during Mexico's War on Drugs," 27.

decolonization.[27] Arguably, the transcultural transmission of indigenous modernity allowed the stitching protestors to temporarily re-configure a community built on mutual trust and critical notions of citizenship resonant of both local and global understandings. However, Olalde also acknowledges the ephemeral, conflict-ridden, and partial ways that the practice of the activists reflects indigenous communal polities, in that they "projected the methods of counteracting the evils of modern westernized societies … onto marginalized groups."[28]

The second anchor is the issues of femininity and Christian moral virtue that pervade the braided histories of hand embroidery with miscegenation (*el mestizaje*), a violent colonial form of transculturation. Olalde argues that the protestors employed this "technology of gender," which "had served as an instrument to exercise control over women's bodies and defined the role of motherhood in the construction of the modern Mexican *mestizo* nation," to counteract "a logic of productivity, private property, and profit."[29] The project thereby transformed embroidery into a "tool" with which "participants could imagine the kind of country in which they would wish to live."[30] Olalde's contribution reveals methods of collaborative world-making by artistic means that underpin on-going struggles of decolonization and democratization, struggles that are not limited to Mexico, but have a particular transcultural history in this region.

Haema Sivanesan's "'Unsettling' the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest: Consent, Consultation, and (Re)conciliation in Leila Sujir's *Forest!*" strongly resonates with Olalde's contribution regarding issues of Indigeneity and decolonization. Sivanesan shifts focus, however, from the collective activism of amateurs to the world-making of one contemporary professional artist. In 2016, Leila Sujir began shooting stereoscopic videos for a light-box based installation in the coastal forests of the South Walbran

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27 Olalde follows discussions by scholars such as Carlos and Emiliano Zolla Márquez, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, Gladys Tzul, and Rivera Cusicanqui in particular, see: Carlos Zolla and Emiliano Zolla Márquez, "2.- ¿Qué se entiende por comunidad indígena?" in *Los pueblos indígenas de México, 100 preguntas* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2004), www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/100preguntas/pregunta.php?num_pre=2; Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *El proceso de aculturación* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1957); Luca Citarella, "Capítulo I. México," in *La educación indígena en América Latina México-Guatemala-Ecuador-Perú-Bolivia Tomo I*, comp. Francesco Chiodi (Quito: ABYA-YALA, 1990); Gladys Tzul in Julia Riesco Frías and Marta López, "'Preservar la autonomía es algo fundamental.' Entrevista: Gladyz Tzul, Activista," *Periódico Diagonal*, March 14, 2015, accessed May 29, 2017, https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/movimientos/25949-preservar-la-autonomia-es-algo-fundamental.html; Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2010).

28 Olalde, "Stitching Critical Citizenship during Mexico's War on Drugs," 36.

29 Olalde, "Stitching Critical Citizenship during Mexico's War on Drugs," 38.

30 Olalde, "Stitching Critical Citizenship during Mexico's War on Drugs," 39.

Valley on Vancouver Island in Canada. Sivanesan, a curator-cum-scholar, was a participant-observer when Sujir visited the region and discussed her project with representatives of the local Indigenous community. Sivanesan is thus ideally situated to carefully unravel yet another kind of collaborative ethos, one based on "friendship as a method,"[31] and to reveal what this ethos can achieve in the face of conflicting epistemologies and a nationally framed art history.

Sivanesan argues that Sujir has developed a "conciliatory" practice that creatively responds to both the contested contexts of Canada's history of immigration and the official reconciliation policy concerning Indigenous people.[32] The author systematically follows the artist as she seeks the consent of the Pacheedaht First Nation (PFN) to film on their land, and shows how this approach complicated but also condensed an artistic practice that was already mindful of transcultural processes.

Sivanesan outlines the subtle negotiation of Indian family roots that has informed Sujir's originally autobiographical project. The artist planned the project to commemorate the recent demise of her mother, who had taken her to the South Walbran forests in order to heal from a cancer-related surgery. Though the Pacheedaht agreed to Sujir's filming because of her personal healing experience, the artist and Sivanesan were struck by the economic reality of the PFN, which meant that they could not afford to address the forest only in cultural and spiritual terms, but were forced to treat it as a key economic asset.[33] Consequently, the project began to reflect the immigrant/settler colonial relationships to the forest, and to address the incommensurability of colonially compromised ways of knowing and experiencing the forest from both sides. Sivanesan analyzes how Sujir's technical-cum-aesthetic approaches eventually changed following the consultative process and the "sentience of the forest" as another agent of the conversation.[34] She began filming with a drone, achieving "a radically different picturing … of vertigo, speed, a fractured image of the landscape, the very impossibility of a totalizing image,"[35] and invited the Indigenous community to contribute a text that concludes her film. Sujir thereby unsettles "the nationalist imaginary" by "symbolically repatriat[ing]

31 Haema Sivanesan, "'Unsettling' the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest: Consent, Consultation, and (Re)conciliation in Leila Sujir's *Forest!*," in this issue, 68; based on Lisa M. Tillmann-Healy, "Friendship as Method," *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, no. 5 (October 2003): 729–749.

32 Sivanesan, "'Unsettling' the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest," 73. Sivanesan's argument here is based on David Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation," *West Coast Line* 46, no. 2 (2012): 28–38.

33 Sivanesan, "'Unsettling' the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest," 56.

34 Sivanesan, "'Unsettling' the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest," 72.

35 Sivanesan, "'Unsettling' the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest," 66.

the South Walbran forest to the PFN," rendering the work "as a gift to the PFN in reciprocity of their trust."[36]

Compared to Olalde's case study, Sivanesan's exploration of what she aptly calls a "relational praxis"[37] based on friendship by an individual artist exploring the (colonial) "contact zone," which Sivanesan extends from Marie Louise Pratt's influential definition as a site of tension to "a site of difference *and* sharing,"[38] Sivanesan's contribution may render the practical limits and political problems of collaboration more clearly. As Olalde has observed in the case of the EPI, the leading group disbanded, and only partially reconfigured in a new culturally engaged association when tensions and disagreement about the (creative) "how to" of social justice increased.[39] Reading Sivanesan's distinction between collaboration taking the form of "allyship" as opposed to "friendship" is also instructive for understanding the Mexican case. As Sivanesan elaborates, while allyship "conforms to a binary dialectic set up by the colonial project—of oppression/anti-oppression, injustice/justice, wrong/right—and thus risks substituting one colonizing hegemony for another," friendship "presumes person-to-person accountability" and "a more fluid, self-aware, open-ended process." [40] Allyship might therefore be used to describe the *modus operandi* of the stitching protestors, who opposed the government and drug cartels by deliberately not distinguishing whether the commemorated murder victims were civilians or criminals, thereby creating a new "we" as opposed to "them." However, since this is still a binary distinction, it is likely to generate tensions when the political situation changes and new alliances emerge.

In contrast to the collaborative project in Mexico City, Sujir's project involves a much lower degree of collaboration, and her elaborate multi-media works do not demand direct participation. Rather, the extent of collaboration ultimately depends on Sujir's own authorial governing of the work's creation. The project is therefore less prone to termination because of (political) group dynamics. Since Sujir envisions the latest, expanded stage of *Forest!* "as an interdisciplinary and transcultural research-creation project"[41] with key partners such as Concordia University, Pacheedaht First Nation, Art Gallery of

36 Sivanesan, "'Unsettling' the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest," 71.

37 Sivanesan, "'Unsettling' the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest," 75.

38 Sivanesan, "'Unsettling' the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest," 73;. Emphasis in original. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

39 Sivanesan, "'Unsettling' the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest," 35–36.

40 Sivanesan, "'Unsettling' the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest," 75.

41 Sivanesan, "'Unsettling' the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest," 75.

Greater Victoria, and the University of British Columbia, it will be interesting to see how working together across social groups and institutions might then allow "friendship" to inform the political and vice versa.

Theresa Deichert's "Contested Sites, Contested Bodies: Post-3.11 Collaborations, Agency, and Metabolic Ecologies in Japanese Art" takes us to Japan to analyze two artworks realized in 2014: Kyun-Chome's installation *Flow in Red* and United Brothers' intervention *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?* Both works are co-authored team projects that use potentially radioactive foodstuffs as material. Deichert's contribution echoes the ecological concern that pervades Sujir's work and marks the horizon of Sivanesan's article, but pushes the boundaries of a transcultural approach to art history even further.

Building on Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, Jane Bennett's vital materialism, and the ecological turn in contemporary art,[42] Deichert asks us to recognize non-human agency as a significant part of artistic collaboration. Departing from notions of socially engaged art as discussed in the West, but also from the different connotation of the concept in Japan, her contribution adds to the growing scholarly critique of anthropocentrism. She thus dismisses art projects in which the social is conflated with or exclusively tied to the human, and calls for a counter-discourse that explores an "ecological approach to art."[43] Clearly distinct from "ecological art"—art that takes ecological issues as subject matter—Deichert's approach is "a research methodology … [that] considers art's fixity within cultural, natural, and technological environments and gestures towards a more inclusive object and non-human-oriented ontology."[44]

By examining how the pronounced inter-personal, human collaboration in her two examples works to de-emphasize singular authorship and reveals more "laterally dispersed" agencies, Deichert's contribution amplifies the actual meaning of a transcultural approach to the collaborative turn.[45]

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42 Deichert also relates her analysis to theories by scholars such as T. J. Demos, Linda Weintraub, Yates McKee, and Andrew Patrizio; see T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016); Linda Weintraub, *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Yates McKee, "Art and the Ends of Environmentalism: From Biosphere to the Right to Survival," in *Nongovernmental Politics*, ed. Michel Feher, Gaelle Krikorian, and Yates McKee (New York: Zone Books, 2007); Andrew Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

43 Theresa Deichert, "Contested Sites, Contested Bodies: Post-3.11 Collaborations, Agency, and Metabolic Ecologies in Japanese Art," in this issue, 80.

44 Deichert, "Contested Sites, Contested Bodies," 90.

45 Deichert, "Contested Sites, Contested Bodies," 88.

Since radioactive particles forgo "any national or cultural delimitations,"[46] Deichert argues, the projects of Kyun-Chome and United Brothers ask the prefix "trans-" of "transculturation" also to account for radioactive particles as actants that render present the enormous scales and scope of ecological interconnectivity. When a gallery visitor decides to step on supposedly contaminated rice from Fukushima, the potential effects of the presence of the "interscalar vehicles"—particles that "move simultaneously through deep time and human time, through geological space and political space"—demonstrate the anthropocentric contingency of how we experience, know, and change the world. [47] While she is well aware of the limits of human knowledge, Deichert suggests that considering agencies that operate independently from human control will allow "for new ways of writing art history, which could end up decisively impacting the creation of transcultural societal and political spaces that can be shared *pari passu* by humans and non-humans alike."[48] The article is thus another good example of the ethical challenges that emerge when exploring the epistemological limits of collaborative artistic practice as characterized by transculturation.

Shao-Lan Hertel's contribution "Deterritorializing Chinese Calligraphy: Wang Dongling and Martin Wehmer's *Visual Dialogue* (2010)" brings the focus back to human interaction, now in the People's Republic of China. The two collaborators in Hertel's case study embody very different artistic painting traditions, brought together in an inter-cultural exchange program. The German conceptual painter Martin Wehmer and the Chinese calligrapher Wang Dongling were commissioned to collaborate for an exhibition series called *Visual Dialogue/Shijue duihua* at the China Academy of Art (CAA) in Hangzhou in 2010. The institutional framing and external motivation for *Visual Dialogue* clearly distinguish this project from the more personally motivated, multi-sited, and long-term collaborations of an "art unit"[49] such as Kyun-Chome or United Brothers. As a close reading of a single artwork, Hertel's contribution comes closest, among all our contributions, to conventional art historical research, and thus provides something of a missing link. Hertel explores the aesthetic, art historical, and political tensions that crystallize in a work of painting-cum-calligraphy situated at the intersections of a nationally

46 Deichert, "Contested Sites, Contested Bodies," 91.

47 The term "interscalar vehicles" and the definition provided here are borrowed from Gabrielle Hecht, "Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence," *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (2018): 109–141; 135, https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca/article/view/ca33.1.05/54. For Deichert's adoption of the term, see Deichert, "Contested Sites, Contested Bodies," 102.

48 Deichert, "Contested Sites, Contested Bodies," 112.

49 Deichert, "Contested Sites, Contested Bodies," 84.

framed art historical discourse, alternative or even resistant painterly practices, and the challenges introduced when two painters work together, while not speaking each other's languages, literal or artistic.

In line with critically minded Western and Chinese scholars,[50] Hertel sees Chinese calligraphy as subject to two contradictory tendencies since the advent of modernism. It either stresses its cultural uniqueness to the point of a problematic (re)orientalization; or it relativizes the particular intellectual, religious, philosophical, and cosmologic notions informing its historical transmission, at the risk of overlooking "the persistence of tradition as part of the critically resistant construction of a modern Chinese cultural identity,"[51] as Hertel quotes Paul Gladston. Hertel also follows Gladston's suggestion that we understand the ongoing transcultural negotiation of contemporary art in and beyond China as the use of "polylogues—that is to say, inter-textual multi-voiced discourses—as a means of opening up differing interpretative perspectives on contemporary Chinese art to one another while at the same time internally dividing and questioning their individual authorities."[52]

Since Wehmer's and Wang's collaboration was based on a sequential compositional process, with Wehmer first painting empty speech bubbles in the style of comics, which were only subsequently filled with ink and brush by Wang, the frame that constitutes a polylogue is indeed the artwork itself, rather than a synchronously and jointly undertaken dynamic painting process. Departing from intersemiotic observations borrowed from comic studies,[53] Hertel concludes that *Visual Dialogue* actually necessitates "a *transsemiotic* interpretation, one that transcends the notion of 'between two.'"[54] She analyses partially incommensurable differences between the ways that the Chinese characters are composed and how calligraphy

50 Hertel traces and builds on shared discussion fostered by Western art historians, critical theorists, and China experts such as John Clark, Paul Gladston, and Frank Vigneron, as well as Chinese scholars, who extensively engaged as curators and critics of contemporary art and calligraphy, such as Gao Shiming, Hou Hanru, and Gao Minglu.

51 Shao-Lan Hertel, "Deterritorializing Chinese Calligraphy: Wang Dongling and Martin Wehmer's Visual Dialogue (2010)," in this issue, 112. Paul Gladston, "Somewhere (and Nowhere) between Modernity and Tradition: Towards a Critique of International and Indigenous Perspectives on the Significance of Contemporary Chinese Art," *Tate Papers*, 21 (Spring 2014), accessed December 26, 2020, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/21/somewhere-and-nowhere-between-modernity-and-tradition-towards-a-critique-of-international-and-indigenous-perspectives-on-the-significance-of-contemporary-chinese-art.

52 Hertel, "Deterritorializing Chinese Calligraphy," 122.

53 Hertel refers here to Jonathan Evans, a scholar who explores the translational dimensions of comics; see Jonathan Evans, "Comics and Translation," in *The Routledge Companion to Comics,* ed. Frank Bramlett, Roy T. Cook, and Aaron Meskin (New York: Routledge, 2016), 319–327.

54 Hertel, "Deterritorializing Chinese Calligraphy," 134.

privileges reading and writing, on the one hand, and the graphic forms of Wehmer's *Leerbilder* on the other, which refer to (un-)spoken words and favor seeing and hearing. These different cultural underpinnings are further complicated in specific speech-bubbles of *Visual Dialogue* that Hertel sees as denoting a metafictional moment that takes part in "a double ontology, mixing two worlds."[55] Hertel's close reading thus does not aim for nor achieve semiotic synthesis, but discerns how the institutionally commissioned inter-cultural dialogue instead yielded a polylogical work. Despite a sequential collaborative compositional process, the work's "transcultural values lies in the very disunity of signs … [that] allow one to 'appreciate the heterogeneous,' and to discover new forms of signs that emerge from these shifts … potentially altering perceptions of what is conventionally conceived as Chinese or western art."[56] Hertel's contribution unexpectedly resonates with Deichert's, as it points to the material agency of the work—embodying and entangling different painting knowledge—as effectively transgressing the limited actual practical interaction and verbal dialogue of its two human makers and the aims of the hosting institution.

Paul Gladston's transcultural reflection "*ROCI China* and the Prospects of 'Post-West' Contemporaneity" traces the polylogical construction of contemporary Chinese art to the middle of the 1980s. Gladston's account supplements Hertel's narrow focus on the contemporary trajectory of calligraphy, as he emphasizes the "continuing culturally syncretic and therefore diffractive intersections between localized tradition, established cultural thinking/practice, and incoming discursive/practical innovations."[57] Bringing us back from Hertel's fine-grained "transsemiotic" analysis of one largely overlooked artwork, Gladston's contribution broadens the perspective by drawing attention to the significantly differing receptions of Robert Rauschenberg's well-publicized *ROCI China* exhibition in 1985, a milestone for the internationalization of Chinese art in the Post-Mao era. In methodological terms, he addresses the resulting "cultural appropriation-translation" that lead to a "parallax" in scholarly and artistic discourses—that is, "alterations in the apparent positioning of objects in relation to differing perceptual standpoints."[58]

In the case of Rauschenberg, we see a somewhat naive artist parachuting into eleven "third world" or non-aligned countries, driven by an

55 Hertel quotes here Roy T. Cook, "Metacomics," in *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, 257–258; 257. Cook formulates his exploration of metafictional instances with reference to Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987).

56 Hertel, "Deterritorializing Chinese Calligraphy," 143.

57 Paul Gladston, "*ROCI China* and the Prospects of 'Post-West' Contemporaneity," in this issue, 170.

58 Gladston, "*ROCI China* and the Prospects of 'Post-West' Contemporaneity," 175.

ambivalent commitment to peace and a desire to overcome post-Cold War compartmentalization, armed with the claim that "artists always understand each other."[59] Gladston also highlights an indirect type of collaboration that the artist realized during his stays in China, during which he engaged with so-called traditional knowledge by visiting artisans working in a paper mill. At the same time, Rauschenberg apparently turned a blind eye to tense encounters with his contemporaries, whose aesthetic and intellectual concepts appeared to clash with the then current trends of American art. Because a sustained, respectful dialogue or close artistic collaboration was missing from this encounter, Rauschenberg too quickly dismissed the work of these artists as belated modernism.[60] As a member of what has been termed the American neo-avant-garde,[61] Rauschenberg was surely unwilling to be associated with this position. Still, the kind of aesthetic appropriation that resulted from this encounter informed, in turn, a range of groundbreaking conceptual and collage/montage-based re-appropriations by experimental Chinese artists. Gladston thus systematically addresses the simultaneity of mutual cultural misunderstandings and (partial) translations, as well as the differences of reception in terms of a "parallax."

The parallax delineates the epistemological boundaries, the limitations placed on "how we know" when artists and art historians are differently situated, and the boundaries that remain despite attempts to work together within artistic practices and art historical discourses. It accounts for the historically conditioned incommensurability of the ways in which we "make a world," or rather plural "worlds." The parallax asks us to acknowledge that we are always already subject to particular cultural and historical contingencies when addressing art. It also allows us to see that the problems underpinning an institutionally or politically demanded "inter-cultural dialogue" have not yet changed, although artists today are often well connected, globe-trotting agents such as Wang and Wehmer. Ultimately, Gladston's diagnosis of a "problematic double-bind" transcends the Chinese context, as it finds

59 Hertel, "Deterritorializing Chinese Calligraphy," 143.

60 An exemplary case in point was Rauschenberg's conflicted encounter with the Chinese artist group "Xingxing" (The Stars) and other artists active in Beijing at the time. The Stars had been claiming local and international recognition with their spectacular open air exhibitions at the end of the 1980s. The highly ambivalent reception of their stylistically eclectic work within and outside of China shows the difficulties resulting from the ideological borders that had separated an originally much more densely interwoven modern art discourse between China and Western societies during the Cold War era. Franziska Koch, "Strategies of Mediation: Considering Photographs of Artworks created by the 'Stars' in 1979/80 and their Changing Historiographical Status," in *Journal of Art Historiography* 10 (2014): 1–42.

61 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

relevance in the case studies of Sivanesan and Olalde, who both hint at how indigenous ontologies not only conflict with coloniality, but challenge decolonization conceived as a collective process that nonethelessremains problematically embedded in modernization. Gladston thus suggests that "the conspicuous factionalism of 'post-West' contemporaneity opens up a problematic double-bind compelling us to shuttle inconclusively on ethical-political grounds—in abjuration of Western coloniality—between intersecting and yet ultimately irreconcilable non-rationalist outlooks."[62] This creates "a seemingly irresolvable impasse counterposing the arguably colonizing immanence of poststructuralist postmodernism with a resistant Chinese foundationalism."[63] Gladston's insight brings us back to Kester's critique of the problematic deconstructivist paradigm, which motivated him to search for genealogies of socially engaged artistic practices outside of the West. Though it may now appear as though we have come full circle, this circle is in fact not quite complete, I argue, and I hope the reader will agree after considering the creativity and new collaborative dynamics displayed in the case studies of this themed issue.

Taken together, all of the contributions to this themed issue make an important argument: When one examines the various modes, scopes, and scales of collaboration in contemporary artistic practices that are driven and informed by transculturation, what emerges is an acute awareness of the "inconclusive shuttling on ethical-political grounds" and the various but resonating and often historically related ways in which the "seemingly irresolvable [discursive] impasses" are constituted. The methodological appeal and actual achievement of a transcultural approach to collaborative contemporary artistic practices then lies in the ability to differentiate, unpack and critically relate complex histories, cultural epistemologies, and challenging ethics that underpin these practices, and haunt and inspire affiliated scholarly discourses.

The question of how we work together during collaboration and the enmeshed, dynamic processes of transculturation have challenged the guest editor of this themed issue to cross the boundaries of her disciplinary, regional, historical, and theoretical knowledge. The coming-into-being of the publication has been a great collaborative learning experience in itself, from the international call for papers issued in spring 2019, through the panel in Ottawa, to a publication process overshadowed by the outbreak of a global pandemic. The resulting themed issue attests to productive thematic, regional, and theoretical differences, driven by a common will to push methodological boundaries, and to foster an art historical conversation that acknowledges

62 Gladston, "*ROCI China* and the Prospects of 'Post-West' Contemporaneity," 176.

63 Gladston, "*ROCI China* and the Prospects of 'Post-West' Contemporaneity," 176–177.

the urgency of working together despite the aforementioned challenges. In the end, it is the sharing of different (world) views and practical takes, the collaborative endeavor in itself, whatever forms it may take, that makes artistic and scholarly world-making such an exciting, creative undertaking.