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'Global' Art: Institutional Anxiety and the Politics of Naming

I would like to thank Hildegund Amanshauser and Sabine Vogel for the invitation to speak at the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts. I would also like to thank speakers Monica Juneja, Hans Belting and Peter Friedl for putting into place the contours of a lively and stimulating debate. Let me take this discussion forward by underlining certain interesting subtexts that inform it.

Firstly, there was the question of the 'we' who are afflicted by the problem of defining 'global' art: Is this a Eurocentric 'we', or an institutional 'we' speaking from the academy and the museum? Or is this the 'we' who see the discipline of art history breaking down or being made irrelevant by its supposed objects of inquiry?

Secondly, I was struck by the tendency to map the paradigm shifts in our understanding of the global condition onto exhibitional and discursive structures. Clearly, we have been attending to the inner adjustments of art history through changes within the academy, writing and pedagogy. Professor Belting provided an excellent account of the term 'global' art. However, what was left undiscussed was the way in which paradigm shifts in the understanding of what constitutes globality, globalism or globalisation have been attempted outside the West (the conceptual space of Euro-American academia and strategic policy), outside the classical institutions of art history, and in the domain of a politics that mediated between culture and the post-colonial national space.

My paper will, among other things, analyse such alternative starting points of a global consciousness – a globalism before globalism. Let me begin, so to speak, *in medias res*, with the critic John Berger's message to the first edition of Triennale India, which was organised by the Indian critic and novelist Mulk Raj Anand and opened in New Delhi in that fateful year of global upheaval and transition, 1968. [1]

Berger wrote: "I send my greetings to the first Triennale of Contemporary World Art to be held in India. It would suggest the possibility of escaping from or even overthrowing the hegemony of Europe and North America in these matters. This hegemony is disastrous because, whatever the personal feelings or ideas of individual artists or teachers may be, it is based upon the concept of a visual work of art as property. The historical usefulness of such a concept has long passed: it stands now as a barrier to further development. The ideology of modern European property is inseparable from imperialism. The fight against imperialism and all its agencies is thus closely connected with the struggle for a truly modern art. I wish you clear-sightedness, strength and courage in your struggle." [2]

The Alternative Beginnings of a Global Consciousness

Berger's message of 1968, despite the ringing tones of its 1960s Leftist rhetoric, reminds us that internationalism is not necessarily a monopoly of the industrially advanced societies and imperialist polities of West Europe and North America. The societies of the global South can equally stake their claim to articulate a vision of the world. The 'will to globality',^[3] as Okwui Enwezor has observed, is reserved not only for those who can shuttle across the globe at will; it can be, and is, also exercised by those whose mobility is either constrained or involuntary, those trapped in oppressive systems or those forced to migrate by adversity. And to such figures, the 'will to globality' is a form of resistance, a form of self-articulation against all odds.

In the early phase of independence, the postcolonial societies of the global South had to confront a specific global structure of necessity, of economic and political asymmetry, because the process of colonisation has already conscripted them into the world system of capital. At the same time, they could also draw on two sources of freedom, which promised new forms of globalist consciousness. First: members of the formerly colonised societies could subscribe to the same spectrum of Leftist internationalist thought and activity that was shaking the societies of Europe. Berger and Mulk Raj Anand, for instance, were united within this spectrum: Anand had been socialised within Fabian socialist and anarchist circles in London, and had fought on the anarchist side in the Spanish Civil War. And second: these societies could retrieve anterior histories of planet-wide coalitions and connections, in which they had participated in the pre-capitalist and pre-imperialist epoch. Globalism is not the outcome of a particular Western logic of economic and political expansion. Rather, it inheres in the transnational networks of the pre-capitalist epoch: the Mughal, Ching, Safahvid and Ottoman empires each had their world-circling networks of trade, pilgrimage and diplomacy; the Islamic world conceived of the planet as the space for the amplification of the *Ummah*, held together by the protocols of pilgrimage; the Buddhist world saw itself as a web spreading from a point of origin in northern India outward to diverse terrains. The Silk Route, the Spice Route, and the exchange networks of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean all offered proposals for the envisioning and realisation of world-wide social structures.

Thus, the ideological position of the 1968 Triennale India was clear. It was intended to demonstrate that a globalist consciousness, an internationalism, does not flow only from the former imperial centres to the former colonies. That is why I believe it is important to re-insert this neglected and even lost history into our discussion of present-day globalism. The narrative of globalisation, with its driving momentum and many discontents, is all too often told from the vantage point of a West whose energies were triumphantly redeemed from the wastage of the Cold War and unleashed on the planet at large from the early 1990s onward.

That narrative demands to be interrogated, dismantled, and opened out to accommodate other voices and other trajectories. My own concern in this debate is to emphasise the robust tradition of an internationalism articulated in and from the global South, a globalism from the South that was and is based on the shared perception – across borders and disciplines – of being caught up in the same historical predicament, confronting similar crises, looking for instruments and resolutions.

The Third Position in Cold War Politics

Triennale India was one of the cultural manifestations of the third position in the global politics of the Cold War period. In the 1950s, five visionary leaders of the post-World War II world – Nehru, Nasser, Sukarno, Kwame Nkrumah and Tito – founded the Non-Alignment Movement, to chalk out a position that was equidistant from the United States and the USSR, to demarcate the Third World as an alternative space for self-determination, despite the prevailing exigencies of the Cold War. The novelist, arts editor and cultural organiser Mulk Raj Anand, who proposed and founded Triennale India, embraced Nehru's internationalist position – which aspired to bypass the cartography of superpower-led geopolitics and remap the world, forging affinities between Asia and Latin America, Asia and Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. The dream that inspired these initiatives was that of a collegial and equitable multilateralism.

Nehru coined the term NAM in 1954 in Colombo, in a speech on the Sino-Indian relationship. The *panch-sheel* or 'five principles' he stressed were: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in domestic affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful co-existence. The 1955 Bandung conference, held in Indonesia, was the most important platform for the enunciation of these ideals: it was dedicated to the very optimistic goals of promoting world peace and co-operation, and expressed these through a support for anti-colonial liberation movements across the globe.

The Non-Alignment Movement was a utopian project devoted to breaking the monopoly of the West over the definition and production of internationalism. As against this material and discursive domination of the West, NAM hoped to produce counter-models of political and cultural solidarity – these were to be based *on perceived affinities, not on partisan investments on either side of the hegemonic binary of the US versus the USSR.*

Normally, the genealogy of the term 'globalism' is expressed as a continuous line from internationalism to globalism, from Cold War to post-Cold War politics, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the economic liberalisation of the 1990s taken as its paramount moments of transformation. What gets missed out here are the points of rupture in this linear narrative. My take on present day globalism is informed by alternative starting points and anterior

histories such as those of NAM, cultural interventions such as Triennale India or the São Paulo Biennale.

I read globalism as the deliberate gesture of recovering the human potentialities of the lattices of globalisation from the grip of neo-liberal policy. To the neo-liberal, globalism refers to a nation-state's policy of treating the entire world as a market and source of goods and services. For me, by contrast, the term has a completely different valency. We must not cede the power of words and ideas to the enemy. Globalism, to me, signifies a transcultural, collaborative, multi-participatory mode of performing ideas and conducting projects – with the emphasis on ethical responsibility and a transformative aesthetics. While neo-liberal globalism is an extension of the old imperialist and Cold War geo-politics, my perspective on globalism shifts the locus to the global South, and to acts of resistance. [4]

The Nth Field

Since 2005, Ranjit Hoskote and I have been developing models that deal with the transcultural condition in which we find ourselves today as cultural theorists and cultural practitioners. We have over the last decade increasingly found post-colonial theory in its classical form (the early and undoubtedly seminal work of Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri C. Spivak and Edward W. Said) to be no longer sufficient to the task of attending to our experiential and epistemological complexities. Classical post-colonial theory was tremendously liberating and even formative for us, during the 1980s and 1990s, but it is imperative for us to go beyond it now, through the mode of sympathetic critique. Indeed, the foundational figures of postcolonial theory have themselves explored further in the meanwhile, with Bhabha's account of cultural citizenship in a post-national space, and Said's philosophy of engaged reconciliation in the Israel-Palestine context. However, this still leaves us with the task of theorising the domain of transcultural exchanges, unbounded by prior historical confrontations, in a post-postcolonial space.

One of the first of our models was that of 'critical transregionality'. Our interest is to remap the domains of global cultural experience by setting aside what seem to us to be exhausted cartographies variously born out of the Cold War, area studies, late colonial demarcations, the war against terror or the supposed clash of civilisations. In place of these exhausted, even specious cartographies premised on the paradigm of the 'West against the Rest', we propose a new cartography based on the mapping of continents of affinities, and a search for commonalities based on jointly faced crises and shared predicaments – which produce intriguing entanglements among regional histories staged in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

More recently, in refining this model, we have framed the concept of the *nth field*. [5] The *nth field* signifies, to us, the untagged and unnumbered zones of cultural and political possibility

that arise from the unpredictable encounters among diverse actors in the transverse spaces which are opened up by migration for dialogue and mutual curiosity. We draw this term from the discipline of computer programming, where the *n*th field stands for the as-yet-unspecified but foreseeable iteration of a loop process (the ‘*n*th’ representing an ordinal number). While it seems formally to be a repetition, its actual effects are amplificatory – and can be experienced only when, so to speak, one has arrived in the field. We have adopted the term for its expressive potential.

The *n*th field takes us beyond the default binaries of the post-colonial predicament. Whereas Homi K. Bhabha’s Third Space [6] is often conceived of in terms of the colonial encounter and its various aftermaths — the contact zone, diaspora, the dissolution of the centre/periphery binary, and the circulating mobility between former postcolonial hinterland and former imperial metropole — we have developed the concept of the *n*th field to mark *a transitive engagement among individuals, irrespective of a shared colonial history, which is no longer the only or the most important criterion for an intersection, encounter, or exchange among dissimilar subjectivities. Thus we see the nth field as a site for the staging of a transitivity of horizons, a space where different kinds of cultural imaginations may engage one another in dialogue.*

And where the Third Space remains associated with the demarcation of difference between Self and Other, or even selves and their others, arising from the specific historical crisis of the colonial encounter, *the nth field is premised on the identification of affinities that form a ground for transcultural mutuality, to be explored through the extension of one’s complicity in the crisis, but also the pleasure of the Other; and through an ethical responsiveness to the predicament of the Other.* In the *n*th field, culture is produced through all forms of intersubjective encounters among heterogeneous actors—the crucial factor involved here is the unpredictability of circulation in the epoch of globalization. Today, cultural actors *are developing nth fields for themselves, rather than simply finding themselves in contact zones by reason of inheritance or happenstance, or working their way through to a Third Space against the grain of inherited turbulence.* Crucially, therefore, the *n*th field goes beyond Marie Louise Pratt’s classical conceptualization of the contact zone, which she regards as the site of “spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated... and whose trajectories now intersect.” [7]

Instead, the *n*th field is a site for the active seeking out of engagement, exchange, and intersection through the modes of mutuality, collaboration, and emplacement, an experimental poetics of belonging. The shift marked here is that from the outcomes of structure to the choices of agency; from a scalar-oriented vision of cultural actors acting out the consequences of world-historical stagings of travel, colonial expansion and imperial rule, to a vector-oriented account of cultural actors shaping a way in and through a complicated

world. In terms of political spatiality, too, the nth field redistributes equity through a lattice of newly formulated and negotiated relationships, many of which begin in the awareness that the long-existing constraints of asymmetry must be broken; indeed, such a resistance often overtly inspires and sustains the nth field's relationships of collaboration and synergy. The nth field is based on confident encounter, on the understanding that Self and Other need not be locked in either communion or antagonism, hostage to fragmentation or subjugation, but that they can weave together a fabric of "adjacencies and distances," [8] to adapt art historian Miwon Kwon's memorable phrase for our purpose.

To our generation of cultural producers, location has long ago liberated itself from geography. We map our location on a transregional lattice of shifting nodes representing intense occasions of collegiality, temporary platforms of convocation, and transcultural collaborations. As we move along the shifting nodes of this lattice, we produce outcomes along a scale of forms ranging across informal conversations, formal symposia, self-renewing caucuses, periodic publications, anthologies, travelling exhibitions, film festivals, biennials, residencies and research projects. This global system of cultural production takes its cue from the laboratory — as in all laboratories, the emphasis is on experiment and its precipitates. However, to the extent that this system is relayed across a structure of global circulations, it also possesses a dimension of theatre: a rather large proportion of its activity is in the nature of rehearsal and restaging. We would like to address the dilemmas as well as the potentialities of a mode of cultural production that *is based on global circulations yet is not merely circulatory*; and a mode of life that is based on transnational mobility but is not without anchorage in regional predicaments.

Everywhere and increasingly — whether we are teaching at a para-academic platform in Bombay, engaging in curatorial discussions or conducting research in Berlin, co-curating a biennial in Gwangju, contributing to an international exhibition in Karlsruhe, responding with critical empathy to a triennial in Brisbane, or developing a research project in Utrecht — we find ourselves working with interlocutors and collaborators in what we think of as *nth fields*. All nth fields have similar structural, spatial and temporal characteristics. In structural terms, these are receptive and internally flexible institutions, rhizomatous and self-sustaining associations, or periodic platforms. In spatial terms, these are either programmatically nomadic in the way they manifest themselves, or extend themselves through often unpredictable transregional initiatives, or are geographically situated in sites to which none (or few) of their participants are affiliated by citizenship or residence. Temporally, the rhythm of these engagements is varied and can integrate multiple time-lines for conception and production.

These nth fields certainly throw into high relief the vexed questions that haunt the global system of cultural production: Who is the audience for contemporary global art? How may

we construe a local that hosts, or is held hostage by, the global? Can we evolve a contemporary discussion that does not merely revisit the exhausted Euro-American debates of the late twentieth century by oblique means? Is it possible to translate the intellectual sources of a regional modernity into globally comprehensible terms? What forms of critical engagement should artistic labour improvise, as it chooses to become complicit with aspirational and developmentalist capital and its managers across the world? At the same time, these nth fields are optimal nodes for the staging of what the art theorist and curator Sarat Maharaj has described as “entanglements,” [9] the braided destinies that knot together selves accustomed to regarding one another as binary opposites: colonizing aggressor and colonized victim; Euro-American citizen and denizen of the global South; Occidental and Oriental, and so forth. A history delineated under the sign of entanglement lays bare the ideological basis of all fixed identities, conjoins them in sometimes discomfiting but always epiphanic mutuality. When such identities are thus unmasked, de-naturalized and dissolved, we are free to work out new forms of dialogue and interaction across difference, a new and redeeming solidarity. In these complex circumstances, the architecture of belonging can never be static. In our own practice as theorists and curators, we have drafted different versions of it in different places. We have drawn on various models of emotionally and intellectually enriching locality, including the *mohalla* (an Urdu/Hindi word meaning a web of relationships inscribed within a grid of lanes, streets and houses), the *kiez* (a Germano-Slavic, specifically Berlin word, meaning much the same thing, and conferring on the resident the privilege of non-anxious belonging), the *adda* (a Hindi/Bengali term meaning a venue for friendly conversation and animated debate), and the *symposium* (not the academic format but its original, a Greek word signifying a drinking party that was also a venue for philosophical discussion). These travelling localities are the neighbourhoods and convocations where the nth field is manifested. [10]

And what might we discuss at these convocations? The power of infinitives, perhaps, to disclose the complicities between an official contemporary and its unacknowledged cousins; to celebrate the carnivalesque; to document the half-forgotten; to allude to elusive historical realities; to annotate our encounters. In the nth field, iterated freshly in every new and provisional neighbourhood and convocation, we could generate modes of comprehending, critiquing and resisting various hazards: the incessancy of theoretical articulation and the riddle-like silence of history; the volatile rhetoric of political elites and the absolute secrecy of the strategic operations through which they exploit the planet. The vibrancy of the nth field rescues us from being conscripted in the cause of a single past or being mortgaged to a single future. The nth field is a provocation to constantly destabilize and re-imagine

ourselves beyond our provisional locations, to converse beyond our presuppositions about belonging and alienation, and so to invite ourselves to the feast of hazard.

As is obvious from my account of the nth field, the emerging forms of art practice across the globe will be distinguished by a rich particularity, which arises from the specific textures of particular sites, production systems, idioms of dialogue and strategies of collaboration.

As such, this art will have to be gauged ideographically and not in a nomothetic manner, instance by instance, and not along the rubric of laid-down criteria. We cannot, *a priori*, enumerate its features or themes; except to indicate that certain generic features may be predicated of art that circulates around the global production system of the biennale circuit or the residency circuit (such as portability, readability, scale, tendency to address planet-wide concerns or multi-specialist co-operation). But this enumeration scarcely exhausts the potentialities of forms that emerge in the nth field: forms that may not necessarily be portable or readily readable, and yet may exert a compelling effect on the viewer.

This turns the question 'What is global art?' around on those who ask it. The real answers are: "Who's asking? And why?" What is the optic through which this question is being phrased – and does it, perhaps, signal a profound institutional anxiety in the academy and the museum (as against the studio and the biennale)? Perhaps it points to a widening divide between the practitioners of contemporary art and those who would wish to bear testimony to it from within the older institutions of art history.

There can no longer be a universalising art history in the sense of an epistemological and discursive motor running the Euro-American centres and driving ancillary activity in various outposts and provinces of the empire. The demand that the artistic imagination situate itself in a universalising production of meaning marks an unfortunate reversion to some notion of a transcendent aesthetic soaring above all the visceral struggles of particularity from which cultural production gathers propulsion. Rather, what we see is the generation of numerous regional histories, each faithful to the textures of its floating point of origin, that are nonetheless woven across each other, so that none may be fully understood without reference to the others with which it overlaps.

Institutional Anxiety: 'Containing' the Surplus of Contemporary Art

It is understandable that in an age of overproduction and excess, biennale fever and museum precariousness, the art institutions are anxious about finding ways of 'containing' the surplus of contemporary art activity. But this form of containment is only a reiteration of what Berger deplored, way back in the 1960s – the tendency to treat art as 'property'. *Those who wish to produce a global art museum or a global art history must attend to the hegemonic tendencies imminent within these projects.*

Art in the age of globalisation eludes neat classification – it is produced from transversal/criss-crossing relationships and diverse subjectivities. These rich and unpredictable entanglements of practice and approach cannot be contained in a template of global art.

The need of the hour, then, is not to produce a menu delineating features of global art, but a greater understanding of the features embedded in the particularities of practice. That is why the nth field as the model of the future, not only contains the promise of Benjaminian 'not-yet', but also proposes a model of praxis that is achievable. The nth field is not produced out of institutional or managerial desires but from the desire of cultural practitioners to map new continents of affinities.

Coda

Here are some responses to the ongoing discussion on the problem of defining 'global' art and the role performed by art history in this context. At the symposium, various resolutions were hinted at; for instance, we heard of a possible abnegation of Eurocentric narcissism that has underwritten discursive control over art history, and a corresponding receptivity to the perspectives of other societies. We also heard of the need to go beyond classical post-enlightenment aesthetics and to engage with aesthetic philosophies of various societies.

Such efforts, even when they seem laudable, are susceptible to basic problems. This would either lead us to arid comparatism or reinstate the kind of essentialism by which Indian art would be judged by Indian aesthetics, Chinese art by Chinese aesthetics – which is unproductive since the contemporary art of these societies elude their classical aesthetics. Meanwhile, would the art establishment admit the applicability of these 'aesthetics of the others' beyond their designated borders? Or will they continue with the United Nations' approach to global art and global aesthetics, where every member has their own locus, but there is no provision for their mingling, dissolution, and re-emergence under the sign of radical transformation.

Art history has committed itself to a self-defeating style of thought: namely teleology. It assumes that art production, circulation and reception will evolve through alternate phases of confusion and clarity, to arrive at a *telos* where artistic production and its aesthetic interpretation are unified in a state of clarity. But as in Plato's great dialogue, *Symposium*, art production and its interpretation are like two halves of the self always attempting to unite, but failing because one half eternally flees the other. That is the fate to which art history must reconcile itself. Art production will always elude, defy, mock and will mostly remain in advance of interpretation. It is not containable in categories and all our concepts and narratives are approximations, wagers and shifting pictures.

The nth field, on the other hand, marks a break with teleological thinking. It does not conscript artistic practice into a *priori* academic thinking ignoring complexities of the present. Nth field demands attentiveness to the present of the practice. It does not see artists as bearers of pre-existing culture, but as agents of volition. The nth field demands that the discipline of art history be broken and remade, re-imagined, to address the reality of changing art practice, and not the other way round.

Notes:

1. For an account of the reception history of Triennale India (late sixties and seventies) and for an understanding of the differently nuanced positions on internationalism see Nancy Adajania, 'Probing the Khojness of Khoj' in Pooja Sood ed., *The Khoj Book 1997-2007: Contemporary Art Practice in India* (Delhi: Harper Collins, 2010).
2. John Berger's message from London dated, January 10, 1968, in *Lalit Kala Contemporary-36*, Special issue on Triennale India, (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1990) p.14.
3. Okwui Enwezor, 'The Black Box' in *Documenta 11: Platform 5* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002) pp.42-55.
4. See Nancy Adajania, 'Time to Restage the World: Theorising a New and Complicated Sense of Solidarity' in Miranda Wallace ed., *21st Century: Art in the First Decade* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery/GoMA, 2011) pp. 222-229.
5. This section is based on Nancy Adajania and Ranjit Hoskote's essay, 'The Nth Field: Horizon Reloaded' in Maria Hlavajova *et al* ed., *On Horizons: A Critical Reader In Contemporary Art* (Utrecht: BAK, 2011) pp. 16- 32.
6. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 37-39.
7. Marie Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.6.
8. Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), p.166.
9. Sarat Maharaj, 'Small Change of the Universal,' unpublished keynote lecture, delivered at the 1st FORMER WEST Congress, organised by BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, 5–7 November 2009. A video recording of Maharaj's address may be viewed online at: <http://www.formerwest.org/ResearchCongresses/1stFORMERWESTCongress/SaratMaharajSmallChangeoftheUniversal>
10. Some passages in this section appeared previously in Nancy Adajania and Ranjit Hoskote's text entitled "Notes towards a Lexicon of Urgencies," *DISPATCH*, the online journal of Independent Curators International (October 2010), online at: http://www.ici-exhibitions.org/index.php/dispatch/posts/notes_towards_a_lexicon_of_urgencies/