

# Geo-Cultures

## Circuits of Arts and Globalizations

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**‘Geo-Cultures’, a research project conducted by Irit Rogoff, a professor at Goldsmiths College in London, investigates how the contemporary practice of art informs rather than reflects globalization processes. Seen in the framework of this study, biennials are interesting places. They have evolved into circuits of research, exchange and dialogue that combine specific local features with the illumination of conditions elsewhere in the world.**

The thoughts put forward in this article are concerned with how to think about the expanded field of contemporary arts practice in this time of globalization. It is an attempt to address a particular dilemma; how can the political economies and the affective regimes and the creative practices, which together make up the field of contemporary arts, be brought into the same investigative paradigm?<sup>1</sup> If the arts are not exclusively a field of expressive creativity on the one hand or a set of productive economies on the other – how then can we gage the very particular way in which they are generative, able to produce new modalities and new registers, within these unique new conditions?

These questions also form the basis of the design of a new research centre currently under development at the University of London’s Goldsmiths College. The centre will open in the autumn of 2009 under the name ‘Geo-Cultures’. The ‘Geo-Cultures’ project begins by focusing on how art reflects the contexts and conditions of its production, a question then replaced by how cultural practices inform the processes of globalization. What is at stake here is a recognition that politics cannot fully account for the conditions that we live in, so while these conditions are political in nature, they require a far broader range of models that will allow us to account for them and their effects, at different registers.

The bulk of the work proposed by ‘Geo-Cultures’ is an attempt to bring together a large range of current practices in the arts including the creative process, curating and organizing exhibitions, disseminating art, and theorizing, and to understand how these are producing new and unexpected realities within circuits of globalization. These unexpected departures are not simply new subject matter or new forms, but also new and unexpected alliances on the exhibition circuit, the innovative mimicry of certain social and political institutions as artistic practice, the production of artistic arenas which enact new political conjunctions and the emergence of a conversation hosted by the art world and its infrastructures, which is not taking place anywhere else at present. Such major international exhibitions as Documenta 10 (1997) and Documenta 11 (2002) heralded substantial paradigm shifts within our understanding of the parameters of the art world. As a result we came to inhabit a far more international, far more socially attenuated, more formally adventurous and more intellectually grounded art world than ever before. Within this world the very concept of what is an art practice has been able to expand from making objects to experimenting with structures or enabling gatherings or doing substantial research. It is one of the contentions of this research project that the pressures of globalization have resulted in a greatly expanded world of artistic practices that is

consequently able to play a far more substantive role in furthering the general culture.

## Reflection

Conventionally, the arts are seen to represent the realities of globalization either as thematic subject matter or as increasingly hyper-mobile processes. As such, many contemporary arts practices set up extensive analyses of the conditions and cultural effects of different aspects of globalization. A case in point would be Raqs media Collective's *A (age) / S (sex) / L (location)* of 2003. In this installation, workers 'living between an online and an offline world in time zones on the outer reaches of cyberia'<sup>2</sup> at a call centre in India are taught to sound like and be able to introduce references familiar to the inhabitants of the culture they are making calls to on behalf of some multinational company employing data outsourcing which has produced a new digital proletariat. 'a / s / l maps the time geography of shifting identities in a new economy, where call centre employees who are physically located in India answer customers in Minneapolis in a Midwestern accent.'<sup>3</sup> a / s / l confronts us with a slippery location which can only be understood temporally. Located neither in India nor in the American Midwest, we find the production of a corporate location within a fibre-optics network which redefines many elements; the location of the work, the location of the communication and in the process confounds everyone's certainty that it is possible to know who you are talking to.

This digital proletariat, which operates these call centres around the globe, embodies a new sensibility of situatedness, being simultaneously materially located and virtually dislocated so as to produce a performative alternative to the polarity of such opposites in earlier discourses, which often confused identifiable location with understanding. And that of course is the point, the Enlightenment legacy, so central to the constitution of geography as knowledge, that to be able to name and to locate automatically leads to being able to know.

So that is one mode in which globalization is represented within contemporary artistic practice, as a direct engagement with some of the specific issues raised by its processes. Equally, many social scientists and empirical scholars see the immense proliferation of artistic practices, events, institutions such as international exhibitions, biennales, art fairs, or the ever-increasing mobility of travelling artists, works, curators, as well as the great rise in both buildings and funding structures and categories that make up the art world as effects of globalization, albeit in a form that can be distinctly located within the art world, a world that is spatiality distinctive from named geographical entities. If mobility and proliferation are the hallmarks of globalization, then the art world, it would seem, is an exceptionally good place in which to study these as leisure and entertainment economies.

## New Connections and Sources of Knowledge

In addition to these representational modes of artistic practice and empirical scholarship described above, there have also been emergent new conjunctions between the arts and forms of organizing, activism, self education, gatherings, event staging and political protest. Quotidian activities such as urban walking become, in the hands of many such practices, a process of urban investigation or an embodied protest against the evacuation of different kinds of inhabitation out of zones of regeneration or urban development. Or the expression of solidarity with indigenous populations being uprooted or disenfranchised. (stalker, Rome). Equally the proliferation of education based practices of late; projects which have turned museums into laboratories ('Laboratorium', 1999) or into investigative projects ('Academy', 2006), exhibitions into schools ('Manifesta 6', 2005), art spaces into seminars ('Unitednationsplaza.com', 2007), political demonstrations into orchestrated performance pieces ('Disobidenti', 2003) and theatres into study gatherings ('Summit', 2007). These have been seen by said scholars as the ever-expanding field of arts practices, which in tandem with ever-greater mobility, the information society and the growing range of entertainment and leisure activities, needs to be viewed as a new political economy within globalization.

In addition to such strategies of representation, we need to think out attempts to reverse this understanding and investigate how the arts are producing both unexpected cultural phenomena and unexpected new knowledge within the circuits of globalization.

The Geo-Cultures inquiry is situated at the intersection of several vectors, both historical and contemporary. It is located in the aftermath of colonialism, diffusionism and post-colonial self-constitution on the one hand, and on the other hand their concomitant, ever-growing diasporas. The impact of cultural cross influences and of fusions born of mobility, new proximities and new struggles for recognition and for multivocal cultural self-perceptions are the ground on which the materials being worked with take place. It is important to bear in mind though, that these mobilities are not simply those from the 'Global South' or the 'Global East' towards the West, but also complex circulations within each one of these entities itself.

The relationship between stability and circulation has grown strained. The stabilities of citizenship and emplacement and their related access to rights, protections, inclusions, situated knowledge and legitimated cultural production are countered by an ever-increasing array of categories of those who cannot automatically assume such accesses; immigrants, migrant labourers, refugees, asylum seekers, diasporic communities, displaced cultural traditions, not to mention the numerous bodies on the move within the circuits of mobile capital, outsourcing and franchising or those who are on the move for the gratification of various desires such as education or tourism. Such a level of bodily circulation has impacted on the very possibility of arguing 'situated knowledge' simply as a series of direct relations between subjects, places and epistemologies.

## Relational Geographies and Relations with Singularities

Having investigated the relations between location, positionality, subjectivity and arts practices in several books and various articles and exhibitions, I want to now move my thinking in two directions; in the first place towards the concept of 'relational geographies'. The relationality of this model of geography lies in two important transitions. The first is that it is no longer anchored in the cohering imperative of the nation-state. Instead we have a map that is composed of aggregates of intensities, of national or ethnic loyalties, of insurgencies that link and empathize and spark off each other, of generational loyalties to great moments that cross boundaries, histories and languages. This relational geography does not operate, as does classical geography, from a single principle that maps everything in an outward bound motion with itself at the centre. Instead it is cumulative, it lurches sideways, it is constructed out of utopian moments of unreasonable hopes, of chance meetings in cafés, of shared reading groups at universities, of childhood deprivations that could speak to one another, of snatches of music on transistor radios, of intense rages, of glimmers of possibilities offered by ideas that enable one to imagine a better world.

Parallel to these mobilities and relational geographies, we are also witnessing a previously unimaginable set of circulations within the world of art and creative practices. The number of new exhibition forums and the way they have opened up unexplored regions to a larger world of art, the direction of their mobility – which defies the traditional paths from centre to periphery, have rewritten the global map of art.

The second concept that informs these thoughts concerns newly globalized forms of situatedness and their possible relations with singularities, or in other words, with ontological rather than externally designated, or identitarian communities. If location is by definition the site of performativity and of criticality rather than a set of naturalized relations between subjects and places, how then within this shift can we address issues of a necessary and critical cultural location; of the place from which we speak, in which we ground our positionality, from which we understand meaning and in which we might be able to foresee an effect. Do the new cultural effects of globalization produce communities which share, to paraphrase Jean Luc Nancy, a 'being in common' rather than a 'having in common'? <sup>4</sup> He is doing so in the name of a complex and very contemporary politics of what he calls 'the places, groups, or authorities (... Bosnian Serbs, Tutsis, Hutus, Tamil Tigers, Casamnce, eta Militia, Roma of Slovenia ...)' that constitute the theatre of bloody conflicts among identities, as well as what is at stake in these conflicts. These days it is not always possible to say with any assurance whether these identities are intranational, infranational, or transnational; whether they are 'cultural', 'religious', 'ethnic', or 'historical': whether they are legitimate or not – not to mention the question about which law would provide such legitimation: whether they are real, mythical, or imaginary; whether they are independent or 'instrumentalized' by other groups who wield political, economic, and ideological power ... <sup>5</sup>

The predominant informing question then, is how we can read current artistic practices ranging from fine arts, architecture and spatial practices, Internet and screened media, curating and organizing, music and sonic cultures, performance and performativity, as manifestations of these mobilities and paradigm shifts in the relations of subjects, processes and institutions to places. These unexpected departures are not simply new subject matter or new forms, but also new alliances on the exhibition circuit, a proliferation of biennials and international exhibitions, innovative mimicry of certain social and political institutions as artistic practice, the production of artistic arenas which enact new political conjunctions, the production of a vast dissemination, translation and publication project and the emergence of a conversation hosted by the art world and its infrastructures, which is not taking place anywhere else at present. Beyond questions of subjects, labour, commodities and capital investments on the move, this discussion aims to articulate how

we can interrogate such a political economy of cultural circulation at the level of artistic practices.

### Field Work

A critical interrogation of the manifestations of current mobilities and paradigm shifts in the relations of subjects, processes and institutions to places could involve a shift in vocabulary, one that would not allow place to settle down into any form of hardened or coherent identity. I would propose the replacement of 'place' with two contingent terms; that of 'site' and that of 'field and field work', as well as the replacement of location by a set of relational geographies.

'Field work' is obviously a borrowed term – borrowed from the reflexive debates that have been generated within cultural anthropology over the past 20 years, but it is not a borrowed term taken up here in the form of a metaphor to be dragged around across different arenas of practice in order to somehow unify them – to merge them with some semblance of coherence of either project or method. To do that would involve us in the workings of metaphor with its mechanisms of likeness and of equation, which at this stage of our activities we would probably wish to avoid altogether.

Instead, it is perhaps the conjunctions of simultaneously occupying a dual positionality of being spatially located in an inside and paradigmatically on the outside, or vice versa, that this deployment of 'field work' actually aims to capture. This disjunction and this very necessary duality, offer us not the multi-inhabitation of one space as in the discourse on space offered up by Henri Lefevre and his followers such as Edward Soja, Rosalyn Deutsche or Neil Smith, but the internal split that demands that we perceive of ourselves as both inside and outside of the field of activity and of its perception.

In critical cultural anthropology, George Marcus put this very well when he stated that the great turn in anthropological perception of 'field work' in the late twentieth century was its move from 'being annals of rapport (between subjects of discourse and objects of knowledge) to being replaced by annals of complicity – as constructing the primary field work relation'.<sup>6</sup> 'Rapport' was fed by an illusion of understanding, empathy and the ability to seamlessly translate between knowledges while 'complicity' stands for the stoppages and blockages of self-conscious reflection which perceive us as the producers of the very knowledge we aim to transmit through the languages, narrative structure and cultural tropes that constitute our consciousness. And the entire enterprise of such complicitous 'field work' is understood as a *mis en scène*, a conscious staging, obviously implying a performance and several sets of audiences at which this performance is directed. This, as Marcus states, is: 'The very basic condition that defines the altered *mis en scène* for which complicity, rather than rapport, is a more appropriate figure for an awareness of *existential doubleness* on the part of both anthropologist and subject; this derives from having a sense of being *here*, where major transformations are underway that are tied to things happening simultaneously *elsewhere*, but not having a certainty or an authoritative representation of what those connections are.'<sup>7</sup> In part, Marcus's distinction highlights a familiar anthropological as well as artistic dilemma between the raw materials of events and conditions and the means of representations and the interpretative structures which allow us to transport them halfway across the world for the purposes of being both informative and of making a point. We have seen many instances of artistic practice that simply import the images of the camps in Palestine or the deaths in Rwanda or the Homeless in Kiev and we have all felt the discomfort of having to somehow plot for ourselves a positioned response that would use these images within the critical trajectories we inhabit as thinking, responsible viewers. To show or to agree that something is 'horrible' is simply not enough.

## Complicity

To some extent it might also be said that the distinction between 'rapport' and 'complicity' is equally applicable to various art practices and their relation to location. One of the hopes in taking up 'field work' was to be able to get away from the notion of 'site specificity', which in art practice terms has assumed the establishment of a 'rapport' with a site through an immersed investigative knowledge and the subsequent attempt to reveal and unmask some of the deep structures and unacknowledged interests and affiliations that its surface might have glossed over. In 'field work', as we might be able to see, location goes beyond digging to expose what lies beneath the surface and towards the invention of new sensibilities through which one might live out and experience them.

We can compare some the excavative nature of a serious investigation of urban spaces such as the work of Martha Rosler, for example, or that of Hans Haacke, with Francis Alys lugging around a block of melting ice or dribbling some blue-tinted water along the city streets he haphazardly happens to be walking along – from exposing and making visible the hidden structures of social and cultural existence in the case of Rosler, Haacke and others to inventing new and imaginative modes of inhabiting space. This second example is a relation which is far closer to a notion of 'complicity' in the ways in which the inarticulacy of the phantasmic is brought into play, a condition that cannot be made subject to rational, analytical discourse. I am thinking here also of such projects as that of Waalid Raad under the aegis of the Atlas Group, in which the civil war in Lebanon is explored through tales of covert gambling at horse races by respected university professors and tales of kidnap and political captivity which resonate with the unspoken sexual frissons of capture and domination as put forward by a highly gendered, masculine in this case, imagination. To 'unframe' the conflict in Lebanon from being purely the staging ground of political forces, of colonial legacies, of ethnic conflicts, of ideological battlegrounds, of hostile and opportunistic neighbours to the south and to the east, of superpower interests that want to maintain the region in an endless state of unresolved turmoil – to allow it to speak at such oblique angles to the conflict itself, allows us to establish a whole set of alternative entry points and identifications, to inhabit it without being compelled to produce some highly moralized set of positions by which we pass declaratory judgement.

## Linked Peripheries

Site and site-specificity are important spatial and artistic designations. Beginning in the 1960s when 'site-specific' artistic practices insisted on the physical conditions of a particular location as integral to its production, and culminating in our contemporary realization that site is not only a physical arena and that its stability has been shaken by a nomadic dispersal. However, if 'site' is more than context, if it enables the production of knowledge as the implementation and reciprocal influence of art and geography, how does the specificity of a site produce knowledge that is able to transcend its own conditions and languages and that can circulate beyond its location?

One of the ways in which to imagine such local transcendence is via a concept of linked peripheries – there are now 146 (known) biennial exhibitions around the world. These have become a circuit of investigation, exchange and conversation that bypass the traditional centres of art and culture such as New York, Paris, London, Moscow, Berlin, etcetera. Instead we have been witnessing an intriguing mode of exchange and investigation emerging from these combinations of detailed local specificity (*site specific* to the exhibition) and the desire to illuminate some similar set of conditions elsewhere. Perhaps the most intriguing moment came in the late 1990s when, in reading the various statements coming out of biennials on different continents and from different cultural traditions, it became evident that there was little desire to emulate older Western models of international spectacle, and that instead an attenuated attention was being paid to

producing a location that was both specifically located and simultaneously diasporic. In this way a link to a variety of elsewheres and other traditions could be forged, but not through the emulation of a bland internationalism but rather through the often tough and tragic mobilities and their battles to insist on their hybrid status. (The Johannesburg Biennale of 1997 and the 7<sup>th</sup> Cairo Biennale 1998 come to mind here). Both intentionally and unintentionally a set of links between empirically unconnected regions and arenas began to emerge; not new regions of broad identity, but platforms of shared concerns.

### **New Vocabulary**

I would say that it is the ability to address issues not through the specificity of a given location, but rather through the generation of a new vocabulary, that would be more hospitable to unusual and sometimes hostile conjunctions. Such an instance was the 'Territories' exhibition that took place in KW Berlin, Kunsthall Malmö and elsewhere in 2003 – and which brought together a shared set of concerns about shifting territorial formations within the more conventionally accepted geographical designations of nation-states; occupations, demilitarized zones, privatized spaces and gated communities. By thinking about 'territory' rather than naturalized place, the curators were able to link disparate places and practices across the world as an emergent concept of a territoriality that required us to reference an alternative political and analytical language than the one by which we normally address our criticism of current states of domination, disenfranchisement or extra-territoriality.

This duality has resulted in new 'relational geographies' we do not yet know how to name. If the model of the past was for regional curators to travel towards the traditional centres of the art world such as New York, Paris, London, etcetera, and find work there that they could bring back with them to exemplify the latest shifts in the languages and pursuits of contemporary art, while curators of major international projects used to roam the world in search of local practices that would inform their audience of some supposed culture 'over there' – this has now totally inversed itself. One of the most interesting recent developments has been regional alliances; the recent Shanghai Biennale, Gwangju biennale and Guangzhou biennales have formed a regional alliance that set them up as a grand tour – emulating the language of the 2007 circuit of Documenta 12, Venice Biennale, Münster Sculpture Project and Basle Art Fair. Equally Central-Asian and Middle-Eastern arts initiatives have linked themselves in similar modes, combining exhibitions and arts fairs under one label of activity. The conference and conversation programmes developed within these various projects again insisted on an encounter between a certain meta-language of theoretical concerns and the specificity of a set of local engagements on the ground.

Perhaps most intriguing have been the emergence of a host of new regional imaginations – how do new regional formations come about and do creative practices have a part in shaping them? For example, the contemporary art world in Turkey has set itself the task of becoming the hub of a Balkan, South-Eastern European artistic sphere, (Platform Garanti, Art Centre) while in the inhospitable climates of the Eastern Mediterranean, practitioners from Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan are quietly and discretely forging joint projects that hint at a new Middle-Eastern cultural formation but very often have to take place at quite a distance from it. ('Liminal Spaces' in Israel and 'Home Works' in Lebanon are two examples of such regional initiatives that reference the local outside of the limits and boundaries set up by constraining politics.) In the aftermath of hundreds of years of colonial empires and superpower dichotomies, the arts are becoming the site of a new cultural-geographical imagining.

## Prologue

A recent exhibition named 'Di / visions – Voices from the Contemporary Arab World' curated by Cathrine David at the House of World Cultures in Berlin (2007), consisted of 16 vast screen interviews with artists and thinkers from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Suspended through the dark building on luminous panels, they became a temporary inhabitation of a Western sphere by a sophisticated, self-questioning, audacious set of voices that refused the identitarian simplification that Western political analysis imposes on them. Instead, both formally and substantively, a winding, conversational mode invoked other worlds in front of our eyes, without being descriptive or oppositional.

This project came to represent, for me, the possibilities inherent in arts practice for rethinking global relations and moving around global knowledge. It also exemplified an emergent mode which I am calling 'practice-driven theory' in which it is practice that is setting agendas for how to work in cultural theory. The project proposes a mode of framing around an issue, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the political radicalization within the Arab world, which are of shared importance to both the interviewees and the audience listening to them in another location and in other circumstances.

It sets up several parallel discourses, produces an intertextual field of subjectivities, evolves a specific visual form for its preoccupations, relies on extensive and painstaking research and links location and knowledge production in mobile forms. This project exemplifies what I am calling 'Geo-Cultures' in this discussion.

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## Footnotes

1. For a further discussion of affective regimes see Patricia Clough (ed.), *The Affective Turn* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
2. Ursula Biemann in: *Geography and the Politics of Mobility*, tentoonstellingscatalogus (Wenen: Generali Foundation, 2003), p. 25.
3. Ibid.
4. J.L.Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), xii-xx.
5. Ibid.
6. George Marcus, *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin* (Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 1998).
7. Ibid.

## Tags

Art Discourse, Critical Theory, Affect

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