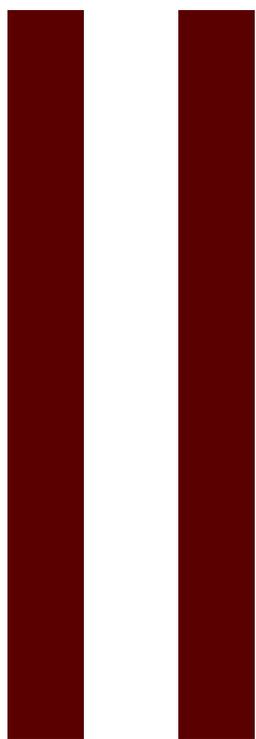


*A reader*

قلقله

*(Qalqalah)*



**Antariksa** →

**Biljana Ciric** →

**Maxime Guitton** →

**Marianna Hovhannisyan** →

**Otobong Nkanga** →

**Victoria Noorthoorn** →

**Sarah Rifky** →

**Simon Soon** →

**Bétonsalon – Center for Art and Research  
Kadist Art Foundation**

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# The Place from Where We Work

Introduction  
Virginie Bobin,  
Léna Monnier,  
Élodie Royer

I-

The contributions to this second issue of *Qalqalah* were born from encounters and discussions held during seminars we recently organized or were invited to attend. *Collecting Matters: ↳ The Place from Where We Look*, organized in June 2015 in Paris by Kadist Art Foundation, examined collecting strategies, the re-writing of art history and the reconfiguration of artistic practices in the age of globalization. Bringing together six young international professionals, curators and researchers,<sup>1</sup> the discussions focused on the notion of locality. If “the place from where we look” is socially, ideologically and culturally conditioned by a given society, what view should we take of our practices in a globalized context? *Between Knowing and Unknowing: Research in-and-through-Art ↳*, a seminar organized by the Times Museum of Guangzhou in September 2015 attended by Bétonsalon, led to an encounter with Indonesian historian Antariksa. There he presented a mapping of practices and ways of teaching in Indonesia, in a dialogue between local traditions and global influences. Testifying of displacements and frictions, convergences and porosities, his accounts resonate in our ways of working and thinking a world in constant motion, with geographies stretched out and reconfigured by the “imagined communities” Arjun Appadurai was already speaking about back in 1996,<sup>2</sup> after Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities”.<sup>3</sup> They lend a historical depth to other more contemporary narratives expressed around “scenes” or “regions” often associated—in the imagination of the “art milieu”—to markets rather than to networks of influences and artistic and intellectual exchanges.

All these questions influenced how we imagined this second issue of *Qalqalah* that examines notions of “locality/ies” and “globality/ies”—by considering the global as made up of “co-localities”:<sup>4</sup> not as a transcendental and abstract space, floating above localities, but instead more “textured,” to quote Filipino art historian Patrick Flores;<sup>5</sup> by positing that the local is not necessarily related to the idea of roots, but can be found by affinity and pooling.<sup>6</sup> We sought to understand how relationships between localities are played out: how to feel close despite distances, how to exchange and share common content and interests, beyond the paths traced by colonial and neo-liberal movements. Also, how these affect and nourish our ways of working, particularly when it comes to collaboration.

In this regard, the piece written by Antariksa → offers a fascinating model in its specificity. He begins by introducing the reader to the ceremonies surrounding the musical instruments kept at the royal

palace in Surakarta (Indonesia), before leading us along the footsteps of the *mpu* (master builders of royal objects) and the *pandes* (workers), artisans at the heart of a system of knowledge-sharing based on living and working in a community. This transfer of skills has nourished the practice of the arts in Indonesia over several centuries, even as it continued to remodel itself over the course of various conflicts, influences and encounters, in particular under Dutch colonialism and Japanese occupation.<sup>7</sup> →

Relationships of hybridization between local traditions and outside influences are at the heart of the trajectories interwoven by Maxime Guitton →, who begins with the expatriation of two in theory very different composers and musicians—North American sound artist Alvin Curran and Indian musician Pandit Pran Nath. In Rome, Curran deconstructed his musical education when faced with the social upheavals taking place in the Italian capital at the end of the 1960s, and opened himself up to the practice of collaboration. In New York, Pran Nath came in contact with disciples like La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, who were ready to absorb the teaching that the modernist rigidity of Indian universities no longer allowed him to dispense, considerably influencing the minimalist current in North American music.

In this second issue we also explore the various methodologies developed by curators and historians in formulating unofficial histories of art specific to certain localities, uncovered by the great narratives of modernity—projects and methods that reveal how the global has affected the manner of working of these professionals.<sup>8</sup> →

Armenian curator and researcher Marianna Hovhannisyan → attended the seminar *Collecting Matters*. Through an interview with Armenian artist Grigor Khachatryan →, she presents her project entitled *Archive-Practice*. By assembling a collection of artifacts and interviews, Hovhannisyan identifies the landmarks of artist and curator initiatives in the 1990s, in the wake of Armenian independence. In the interview, the two talk about the field of performance as a means of resistance, as a space that allows for the creation of new artistic perspectives in a country shifting from Soviet to post-Soviet. For Khachatryan, in this context, “contemporary art is politicized art by necessity.” In an environment also influenced by the Soviet Union but in a different way, Serbian curator Biljana Ciric →, based in Shanghai, looks at the construction of artistic institutions and the development of art practices in China. She investigates acts of withdrawal from the 1960s to the 1990s by Chinese artists seeking to extricate themselves from an official context.

Historian Simon Soon → identifies the nature of relationships between localities, in particular those grouped under the label “South-east Asia.” He speculates on the existence of the “global domestic” as a “pretense of cosmopolitanism,” referring to a more invasive locality, a culture that travels with ease declaring good intentions, while aware it is not required to bow to friendly conventions or to the overreach of their specificities. In concluding his text, Soon proposes instead “privileging the place one gazes from to recognize the local as more than a passive geographical vessel (...) too keen to adopt without adaptation.”

Artist Otobong Nkanga → proposed an iconographic contribution; she chose from among the archival photographs she initially presented in her exhibit at the Kadist Foundation entitled *Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine* ↳ —Nigerian pidgin English for “take out your eyes, I’ll lend you mine”—where she invited the spectator to “borrow” the artist’s perspective and look closely at what has been deliberately obscured. Our attention is thus directed to the history of a site the artist recently “encountered” in Namibia, *The Green Hill*, a copper mine intensively exploited during German colonization. The images she has selected retrace the history of the workers who spent their lives working in the mines.

While Simon Soon’s text → evokes a kind of symbolic violence linked to the system of art, a drawing by Ana Gallardo selected by Victoria Noorthoorn → confronts us with the violence art can hold over the viewer: a violence itself provoked by the extremely difficult social context behind the conception of the drawing—in the “twilight” room of a small village in Mexico, where the artist found herself working in exchange for the opportunity to develop a project that she would never complete. More generally, the feeling of shock upon seeing this drawing questions our ability to comprehend the violence of images dispensed daily by the media from close or distant localities, and the projections and apprehensions they arouse.

At the close of the *Collecting Matters* seminar held on 25 June 2015 at Bétonsalon, a book passed from hand to hand. Its title, *L’imaginaire hétérolingue* [the heterolingual imaginary], seemed to carry the promise of a possible way forward.<sup>9</sup> → In it, linguist Myriam Suchet turns to literature to seek an alternative to the homogenizing construction of identities ↳, and invites us to imagine, “at the crossing of languages,” other ways of imagining the world. In this spirit, we come right back to our heroine Qalqalah who, through the words of Sarah Rifky →, returns to haunt these pages, and urges us to be cautious of language. By cultivating this incertitude, the contributors in this issue have in their own way opened a path to other “textured” imaginaries.

# Notes:

1. Marianna Hovhannisyana (Armenia), researcher and curator currently based in Istanbul (Turkey); Yu Ji (China), artist and cofounder of am art space in Shanghai (China); Moses Serubiri (Uganda), a critic, researcher and curator based in Kampala; Simon Soon (Malaysia), researcher and curator based in Sydney and Kuala Lumpur; Yesomi Umolu (Nigeria/GB), at the time curator at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum (Lansing, Michigan, USA), and today curator at the Logan Art Center in Chicago; and Natalia Zuluaga (Colombia, USA), a curator based in Miami. ←
2. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996. ←
3. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1983. ←
4. As emphasized in the text by Simon Soon, page 73 ←
5. The presentation given by Patrick Flores was inspiring: instead of being influenced by the global, let us examine how localities influence it. So it is about rethinking localities as coproducers of the global. ←
6. See Antariksa's *Nyantrik as Commoning*, page 9. ←
7. As he explains in two other previously unpublished texts, *Brief Introduction to Taman Siswa* (2014) and *Cross-Cultural Counterparts: The Role of Keimin Bunka Shidōsho in Indonesian Art, 1942-145* (2015). ←
8. In the questionnaire entitled *A Survey for the Internationalized: How was the Global for You?* ↪ published in *aCcessions*, the online journal of Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies, Patrick Flores notes the "moment of the global" in Southeast Asia as creating a paradigm shift in the definition/position of the curator: from artist-curator to art historian-curator. ←
9. Myriam Suchet, *L'Imaginaire hétérolingue - Ce que nous apprennent les textes à la croisée des langues*, Classiques Garnier, Paris, 2014. ←

# *Nyantrik* as Commoning<sup>1</sup>→

Antariksa

I-

Musical instruments occupy a high position in Javanese material culture. The royal heirlooms in the Yogyakarta and Surakarta palaces include lances, state flags and banners, carriages, and books, as well as musical instruments. It is believed that these heirlooms are not just objects that manifest the highly accomplished skills of their makers, but are also objects that have souls, that embody mystical powers, and that require meticulous ritual care and respect (*dicaosi dhahar*, to be fed). Heirlooms are bequeathed to future generations along with all of their associated stories and mythologies. In many cases they are used to legitimize political power.

Gamelan instruments in the palaces of Java are given a title of respect, *Kyai* (the respected one). For example, there is Gamelan Kyai Guntur Sari in the palace in Surakarta. All of the heirlooms, including the gamelans, occupy positions of rank depending on their histories, stories and the nature of their relationships with the sultan. Heirlooms that have been and continue to be used by the sultan are granted an additional title, *Kangjeng* (the honored one), so that the complete name is Kangjeng Kyai. For example, Gamelan Kangjeng Kyai Guntur Laut in the palace in Yogyakarta. These heirloom gamelans are played only in specific rituals. For example, in the Yogyakarta Kraton, Gamelan Kangjeng Kyai Nagawilaga, which was made during the reign of Sultan Hamengku Buwana I (1755-1792), is played only once every year for one week during the Sekaten celebration in remembrance of the birth of the prophet Muhammad. This gamelan is carried out of the palace in a processional called wiyosan and placed in the courtyard of the Great Mosque to the northwest of the palace where it is played during the Sekaten week.

In the past, skilled gamelan makers, along with the makers of other royal heirlooms, were granted the title of *Mpu* (or *Empu*), which means “the honorable” or “the respected” master.<sup>2</sup> The title of *mpu* refers not only to technical skill, but also spiritual achievement. Surpassing the capabilities of a *pande*, who is an expert artisan and is sometimes employed by an *mpu*, the *mpu* possesses special knowledge (*ngelmu*) and supernatural strengths (*daya luwih* and *kasakten*) that stretch beyond the material world. The production of musical instruments is viewed not only as the production of material objects, but also as the manifestation of *ngelmu* that is expressed in the effort to understand the universe, and the meaning and secret of the growth of the human soul towards perfection.<sup>3</sup> To master *ngelmu*, it is necessary to engage in ascetic practices known as *laku* (such as fasting, meditation, staying awake and aware

all night long, and living a solitary life in the mountains and caves) and preparing ritual meals (*slametan*) or offerings (*sesajen*; flowers, animals, specific food and drinks). The intent of the *slametan* is to achieve a condition of well-being (*selamat*) in which events will smoothly follow the route that has been established and there will not be any obstacles for anyone.<sup>4→</sup>

A gamelan *mpu* works with a group of *pandes* (metalworkers, blacksmiths). As we can still find today in several villages in Java, the *mpu* and his *pandes* often live together in a complex of buildings or in one large house that includes both living areas and the smithy.<sup>5→</sup> Although the *pandes* often receive wages, meals and accommodations, we cannot view their relationship with their *mpu* purely in economic terms. The relationship between the *mpu* and the *pande* must also be viewed as a teacher-student relationship in which the teacher guides the students on a mystical journey via the process of making gamelan instruments. Thus, in addition to the economic exchange involved in the production of Javanese gamelan instruments, there is also a transfer of knowledge between the *mpu* and the *pande*. The entire commoning process—residing, studying, working, and creating together—is called *nyantrik*.<sup>6→</sup>

Commonality is the primary foundation of the *nyantrik* process. This commonality is based on a moral perspective regarding the importance of sharing: knowledge (*ilmu*) will become superior knowledge (*ngelmu*) only when it has been shared, absorbed and applied with others. A gamelan *mpu* guards his expertise and at the same time increases his expertise through transmitting his knowledge to the *pandes*.

Joint ownership of knowledge does not mean the dissolution of levels in the possession of that knowledge. Those levels are the second foundation in the *nyantrik* process, which is the belief that knowledge can be achieved through experience, both physical and spiritual. The spiritual aspect of the journey for knowledge is referred to as *nglakoni*. A *pande* must pass through several formidable stages of *nglakoni* before he can be considered to be sufficiently proficient for the responsibilities of certain tasks. For example, in the *mbesot* process (melting and mixing metals, which is the first stage in the production process of making gamelan instruments), not all *pandes* are allowed to appraise the quality of the metal mixtures.<sup>7→</sup> Only senior *pandes* or the leader of the group of *pandes* (called the *panji*), who is appointed by the *mpu*, may make that assessment. Not only is the *panji* considered to be more experienced

than the other *pandes* in seeing the colors of the embers that emerge from the process of mixing the metals, but he also has undergone more ascetic practices that are required for the training of becoming an expert gamelan maker.

If a *pande* succeeds in completing this long *nglakoni* journey, he will become a gamelan *mpu*, a master gamelan instrument maker. When he becomes an *mpu*, then he has the responsibility to continue the *nyantrik* cycle—to achieve excellence, but also to guarantee the formation of *kerukunan* (communality) or to preserve the relationship between himself with the social world outside of himself.

It appears that at the end of the 19th century, the *nyantrik* system was still practiced in several fields until the emergence of the modern concept of education and art in Java at the beginning of the 20th century. One example that can be cited here is the model of Javanese art education that was developed by the traditional Javanese dance group Kridha Beksa Wirama, which was founded by two princes from the Yogyakarta palace in 1918. Until the formation of this dance group, Javanese dance could only be learned through imitation, however in Kridha Beksa Wirama, a system of teaching dance was developed that involved counting the dance movements. Each dance movement or parts of the dances could be isolated, taught and practiced on its own, allowing for a more effective and quicker learning process. It was thought that Javanese dance and music could be protected from Western influences and they acquired a new role in the modern world. This dance group received financial assistance from a Dutch organization so that their Javanese arts activities could be managed with a European administrative system. Another example is the Taman Siswa school system, which was established in Yogyakarta in 1922 by Ki Hadjar Dewantara. Dewantara introduced the development of a more modern teaching method with higher academic foundations in comparison to “old methods that were dependent only upon feelings and estimations.” He developed a systematic approach for the teaching of gamelan in the Taman Siswa school that involved not only classroom rehearsals of playing gamelan, but also lessons of gamelan theory (called *sari swara*).<sup>87</sup>

The teaching model developed at Taman Siswa in the 1920s can be seen as the modernization and formalization of the *nyantrik* system, although Dewantara clearly was not interested in including the ascetic aspects and activities of the *nyantrik* system into the school curriculum. He focused more on the formation of Taman Siswa as a Javanese

response to European education. Initially, Taman Siswa, in principle, was a school with a modern curriculum (with additional focus on teaching and learning Javanese arts, culture and ethics) with a boarding school model where the teachers and students lived together in one complex.

Later, between 1945-1965, Indonesian artists reformulated this Taman Siswa model into a more informal system that is referred to as *sanggar*. The relationships between the artists who live and work together in the *sanggar* cannot easily be categorized as merely teacher-student or *mpu-pande* relationships, but also integrate aspects of brotherhood and familial ties. The ascetic aspects of the *nyantrik* system were not retained in the *sanggars*.<sup>9→</sup>

Changes in the educational system and production of artwork in Java were of course influenced by changes in the world at large. The new world order was oriented towards work, not morals or a structure based on cosmic relationships; it was a world where people labored more to survive rather than strive to achieve perfection in life. In this new order, cosmic relationships became more oriented towards commerce, charismatic status was replaced by luxury and power, the *nyantrik* system was replaced by modern schools, *ngelmu* was replaced by a diploma, and wellsprings of the soul were replaced by physical skills.<sup>10→</sup>

Wukir Suryadi was one of the Indonesian artists who participated in the Instrument Builders Project.<sup>11→</sup> I am interested in reviewing his artistic journey as an example of how the old knowledge in producing artwork in Java is practiced today.

Wukir is known primarily for the originality and uniqueness of his musical instruments and for the theatrical elements of their performance. His musical creations are an integration of plucked, bowed and struck instruments; made from bamboo, tree branches, *garu* (wooden rakes pulled by cows or buffalos in the fields), metal, and daily objects, which are shaped into statues or installations that can be played and produce surprising sounds and pitches.

Wukir never studied music or art formally in the education system. He has honed his skills through informal studies culled through a variety of experiences, journeys, people, and places. I must emphasize here that to this day in Indonesia, Wukir's experiences are not unique or unusual. Although the idea of education in modern schools is accepted in Indonesia, Indonesians do not entirely believe in the reliability of the school system in responding to the challenges of real life. The general understanding is that real education actually happens outside of school.

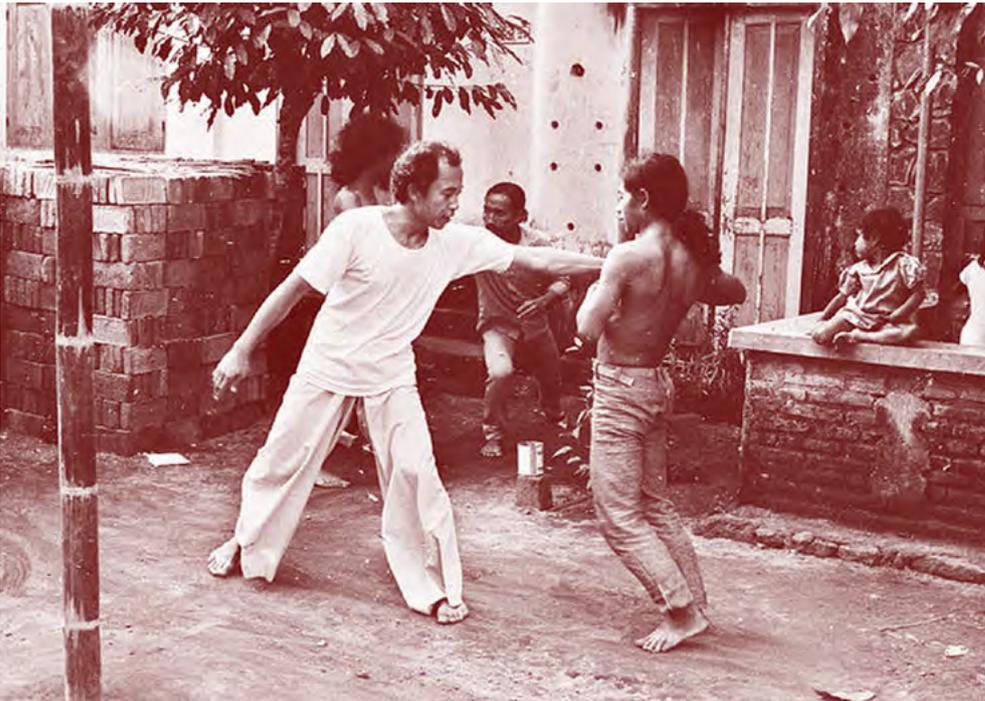
School education is considered to be necessary, but it is of a pseudo or formal nature (whose most important achievement is the diploma, not skill), and it is often considered to be irrelevant to real life. I will cite two experiences from Wukir's long creative journey in relation to the process of attaining knowledge that are related to my discussion about the *nyantrik* system and *sanggar*.

In 1988, when he was 11 years old, Wukir joined the Sanggar Teater Ideot in Malang, which was led by Moehammad Sinwan.<sup>12</sup> Besides joining his older brother who had already become a member of Teater Ideot, young Wukir was interested in the rehearsal activities of this theatre group that included various forms of group games. After school, young Wukir would head directly for the *sanggar* and spend the rest of the day there until late at night, often until the early morning so that he would leave for school from the *sanggar*. As with the other *sanggar* members, besides participating in the rehearsals, he also had daily chores, such as sweeping the floor and tending to the equipment and props that were used in the rehearsals. At age 13, Wukir left his parents' house and *nyantrik* at the *sanggar* for the next four years.

There was no hierarchy in the daily activities in Sanggar Teater Ideot. The rehearsals were planned, held and evaluated together by all of the members of the *sanggar*. The material for the rehearsals consisted entirely of modern training for role-playing, without any spiritual content as practiced in the *kejawan* tradition. The division of work and artistic responsibilities were based on individual functions in the theatre (e.g., director, actor, lighting manager, etc.), and the daily responsibilities of managing the *sanggar* were divided evenly amongst the members based on mutual agreement.

One day, Agus Win, musical director of Teater Ideot, asked Wukir to make (and later play) a tambourine from used bottle caps as the background music for the performance of *Lelaki Kasar* (*The Bear* by Anton Chekov). Wukir completed that task and then was assigned a small role in the performance. ("No longer than three minutes on stage!" recalled Wukir.) This task was Wukir's first experience making a musical instrument. After this first assignment, he began to make other musical instruments, such as various kinds and forms of percussion instruments and guitars from a variety of daily objects, along with two other senior members of the *sanggar*, Agus Win and Luqman Paracu. In the next stage, these senior members encouraged Wukir to become involved in theatre and music projects of other *sanggars*. In this way, Wukir, at a young age, developed

relationships with and studied from artists in other cities in East Java. In 1994, Wukir decided to leave Malang. He settled in the headquarters of the theatre group named Bengkel Theatre under the leadership of W.S. Rendra in Cipayung, East Jakarta. This group that was founded in 1967 in Yogyakarta was one of the famous theatre groups at that time because their creative processes involved collaboration of rehearsal methods of contemporary role playing, traditional Javanese arts, traditional martial arts, and *kejawen* rituals. Various kinds of ascetic practices were integral aspects of the role-playing rehearsals of Bengkel Theatre, including *tapa kungkum* (meditating while partially submerged in water) and *pasa bisu* (refraining from speaking). Their rehearsals were held not only at the *sanggar*, but also in places that were considered to be sacred according to *kejawen* tradition, such as Parangtritis Beach and Parangkusumo beach in southern Yogyakarta. Since early 1970, knowledge of traditional martial arts became part of the materials taught and rehearsed in Bengkel Theatre.<sup>13→</sup> For example, the rehearsal materials for their performance of *Panembahan Reso* (1986) were based completely on the educational discipline in *pencak silat* (martial arts) schools. For about six months, every day from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m., they underwent physical training. After breakfast, they trained in *pencak silat* from 9 a.m. until 12 noon. They rehearsed again from 3 p.m. until 5 p.m. At night (usually until 2 a.m.) they rehearsed the script and staging.<sup>14→</sup>



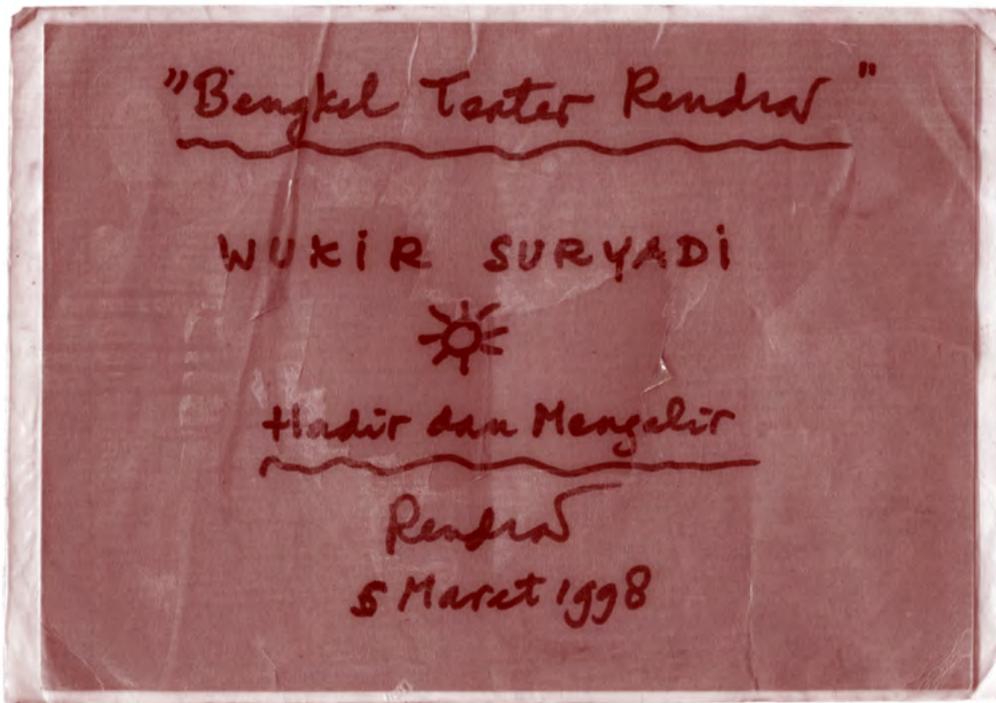
*Pencak silat* session at Bengkel Theatre in Yogyakarta in the early 1970s. Photo collection: Burung Merak Press.

For one year and a half after his arrival at *sanggar* Bengkel Theatre (which occupied 3.5 hectares of land), Wukir was not allowed to enter the rehearsal area. He was allowed to sleep in the front hall (a large semi-opened area located near the *sanggar*) and was given meals from the *sanggar* kitchen workers. In exchange for this, his daily chores were to clean the yard and sweep and mop the *sanggar* floor. After several months, he was given more chores; he was assigned to clean and manage a more important area of the *sanggar*—the fishpond. He was also allowed to live in a small hut near the fishpond. Until that time, Wukir had not yet met Rendra and he was not allowed to participate in (or even approach) the rehearsals; he could only witness the rehearsals from a distance.

When he finally met Rendra, he was asked, “Why did you come here?” “I want to study,” replied Wukir. “Study what? If you want to study theatre, why do you come here? If you want to study theatre, I’ll just give you my books. Then you can go home right now,” said Rendra. Wukir was speechless, but Rendra invited him to take a walk under the trees. Ever since then, Rendra asked Wukir to take responsibility of tending to the trees in the *sanggar* complex. Ever since then he was allowed to participate in rehearsals with the more senior members; initially outside the group (“Outside the circle,” said Wukir), and gradually he was allowed to join a group.

In the 1990s, the learning process in Bengkel Theatre began at 5 a.m. It began with a communal prayer and continued with the morning rehearsal, an English lesson, breakfast, time to wash and clean personal items, work in the fields, lunch, more work in the fields, and ended with an evening rehearsal. Their nights were usually filled with lectures by Rendra, discussions, or dramatic readings of news stories from the newspapers. The morning and evening rehearsals retained the form of rehearsals that had been employed since the 1970s, i.e., martial arts, physical exercise, and ascetic practices—for example, *nggrayang raga* meditation (feeling the body) and *nggrayang donya* (feeling the world).

In Bengkel Theatre, Wukir initially learned music by closely observing rehearsals by Sawung Jabo, a musician and actor of the Bengkel Theatre. Gradually, he began to join the musicians (in addition to also helping the lighting crew) and he became involved in several performances. He also had an opportunity to continue and improve his skills in making musical instruments by experimenting in making and modifying various kinds of tambourines. Wukir studied at Bengkel Theatre for five years until he finally decided to venture out into the world outside the *sanggar*.



Wukir repeated and modified these stages that he underwent in these two *sanggar* in his own creative journey in different places and scales. After leaving Bengkel Theatre, Wukir did not join any other *sanggar*. He settled in Bali for a while, before finally moving to Yogyakarta, where he currently resides. In the new environment outside the *sanggar*, he makes his own musical instruments, sometimes with the assistance of experts or his friends in a new form of *nyantrik* (commoning) that no longer requires ascetic practices and living communally.

By re-reading the practice of commoning in the past, we can see that the word “collaboration” is not sufficient in explaining the practice of commoning in the art world. I propose that *nyantrik* can be used as an alternative concept. The question then arises: Is *nyantrik*, the old and new commoning practices that I have explored here, characteristically Javanese (and/or Indonesian) or are there similar practices in other places? This question will continue to haunt us as we reflect upon the direction and developments of new commoning practices in the art world today.

“*Hadir dan Mengalir*” [Attending and Attentive]. Handwritten certificate by Rendra for Wukir Suryadi after he passed one level of studies at Bengkel Theatre. Archive collection: Wukir Suryadi.

# Notes:

1. Originally published as Antariksa, "Nyantrik as Commoning", in Kristi Monfries (ed.) *The Instrument Builders Project: Hits from the Gong*, Yogyakarta & Melbourne: The Instrument Builders Project, 2015, pp. 64-77. ←
2. In the chronicle of Javanese origins, Tantu Panggelaran (written in the 15th c.), the word *mpu* also means big toe or thumb. See P.J. Zoetmulder, *Kamus Jawa Kuno-Indonesia* (translated by Darusuprata and Sumarti Suprayitna), Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1997, pp. 250, 674. ←
3. For more on *ngelmu* and teachings of Javanese mysticism, see Niels Mulder, *The Individual and Society in Java*, Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1985, pp. 16-33; P.J. Zoetmoelder, *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti: Pantheisme dan Monisme dalam Sastra Suluk Jawa, Suatu Studi Filsafat*, (translated by Dick Hartoko), Jakarta: Gramedia, 1990, pp. 248-283. ←
4. Interview with Daliyo, gamelan maker, Bantul, Yogyakarta, 7 July 2015. These ascetic practices are still observed by gamelan makers in Central Java. See, for example, "Ritual Sang Empu untuk Seperangkat Gamelan", *Kompas*, 29 November 2009. For more on slametan, see Koentjaraningrat. "The Javanese of South Central Java" in G.P. Murdock (ed.), *Social Structure in Southeast Asia*, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1960, pp. 88-115. ←
5. Interview with Supoyo, gamelan maker, Sukoharjo, Central Java, 6 July 2015. ←
6. A verb based on the root word, *cantrik*, a person who always follows the teacher wherever the teacher goes (in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition in Java). In the scope of the Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) tradition in Java, this word became *santri*, and the activity of studying and living together in the *pesantren* is referred to as *nyantri*. See Nurcholish Madjid, *Bilik-bilik Pesantren: Sebuah Potret Perjalanan* [Pesantren Rooms: A Portrait of a Journey], Jakarta: Paramadina, 1997, pp. 20-23. ←
7. Interview with Saroyo, gamelan maker in Sukoharjo, Central Java, 11 July 2015. For more on the technical processes of making gamelan instruments, see Anjar Kristanto, *Studi Kuantitatif Urutan Proses Pembuatan Gamelan Jenis Bonang Pelog Nada 1 (Siji)* [Quantitative Study of the Process of Making Gamelan Bonang Pitch 1 (One)], Thesis, Department of Technical Engineering, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, 2010. ←
8. These two examples are taken from Jennifer Lindsay, *Klasik, Kitsch, Kontemporer: Sebuah Studi tentang Seni Pertunjukan Jawa* [Classic, Kitsch, Contemporary: A Study about Javanese Performing Arts, translated by Nin Bakdi Sumanto], Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1991, pp. 19, 23. It must also be mentioned that Dewantara was the first person to write Javanese music with European music notation. See Harry A. Poeze, *Di Negeri Penjajah: Orang Indonesia di Negeri Belanda 1600-1950* [In the Country of the Colonizer: Indonesians in the Netherlands 1600-1950, translated by Hazil Tansil and Koesalah Soebagyo Toer], Jakarta: KPG, 2008, p. 105. ←
9. See Nuraini Juliastuti, "Sanggar as a model for practicing art in communal life", in *Made in Commons* (exhibition catalogue), Amsterdam: KUNCI Cultural Studies Center & Stedelijk Museum Bureau, Amsterdam, 2013, pp. 10-17. ←
10. See Niels Mulder, 1985, p. 146. ←
11. The Instrument Builders Project was a flagship initiative between Australian and Indonesian artists from a diversity of practices and backgrounds, curated by Kristi Monfries & Joel Stern. The program was realized in 2013 and 2014, with the first two iterations in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, at iCAN (Indonesian Contemporary Art Network) in June 2013 and March 2014, and the third iteration at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia in November 2014. The project worked with 16 lead artists, and played host to many presentations and public events, producing at least 25 new works, performances, instruments and installations over the three iterations with artists generally working collectively on multiple instruments. ←
12. Portions regarding his experiences are based on interviews with Wukir Suryadi, 11, 12, 19 and 20 July 2015 ←
13. Bre Redana, "Rendra-PGB Bangau Putih (2): Usai Perkemahan Kaum Urakan", *Kompas*, 4 April 2010. For more about the transmission of knowledge in pencak silat, see O'ong Maryono, *Pencak Silat Merentang Waktu*, Yogyakarta: Galang Press, 1999, pp. 249-317. ←
14. Bre Redana. "Rendra-PGB Bangau Putih (4): Teratai Itu Berkembang...", *Kompas*, 18 April 2010 ←

# Eastern Winds, Migrations and Musical Reconfigurations: Pandit Pran Nath and Alvin Curran

Maxime Guitton

II-

Editor's note: This text follows a correspondence initiated between Maxime Guitton and participants from the research group *égalité/hybridité/ambivalence* from the Ecole Supérieure d'Art et de Design Toulon Provence Méditerranée: Anaïs Dormoy, Jean-Loup Faurat, Géraldine Martin, Julie Origné, Axelle Rossini, Ian Simms, Mabel Tapia and Margaux Verdet.

From April 20 to April 24 2015, as part of Maryam Jafri's exhibition *The Day After*, the research group — formed in January 2015 — gathered at Bétonsalon – Center for Art and Research in Paris, to represent, by means of heuristic maps, the possible genealogies, displacements and migrations between a text corpus and works mobilized by their reflexion on principles of equality and hybridity. The correspondence with Maxime Guitton acted as a preamble to a public listening session during which activist, popular and high music were composed and recomposed through a series of back-and-forth between North America and India, nurtured these exchanges.

The following text hopes to keep extending these exchanges, by offering the story of composers Alvin Curran, La Monte Young and Pandit Pran Nath's crossed paths as a possible mean to reflect on the objects of the research group.

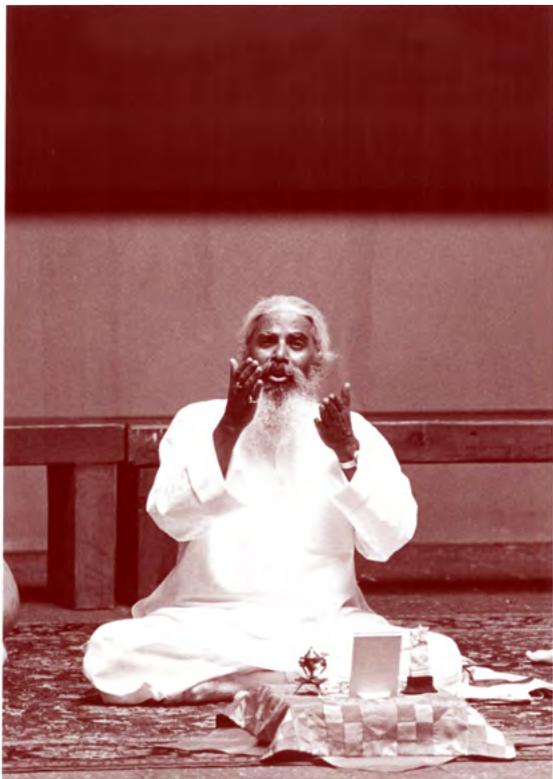
II-

In the US in the 1960s, the x and y coordinates of a composer engaged in new ways of envisioning music could seldom be fixed without referring to the guiding figure of John Cage. La Monte Young, whose work is closely linked to the birth of minimal music, was in those days a “neighbor” of Cage in Manhattan. He declared that to coexist, to depart from Cage’s field of attraction, his music had to be set as a countermodel while claiming its codependence: like the laws governing a treaty of musical spheres, two diametrically opposite musical systems<sup>1</sup> can occur only when the existence of one reaffirms and is based on the necessity of the other.<sup>2</sup>

Like many of his peers, the American composer Alvin Curran also had to position himself in relation to Cage, but to radicalize the man’s ideas rather than produce their negative. He did so within the specific context of his expatriation to Rome in 1964, as if such a transformation were possible only once he detached himself from his own academic instruction, and propelled himself out of the gravitational field of the Cage sphere. When he met the composer for the first time in 1961 while a student at the department of music at Yale, Curran wrote: “I was inoculated against the Cage virus in 1961; the inoculation, however, didn’t take.”<sup>3</sup> Thus it seems that the musical revolution rumbling around Wesleyan University—only a few kilometers from the temple of twelve-tone serialism that was then Yale—had no meaning for Curran: as if such geographical proximity made the disparity in thought that separated Cage from the theoretical and musical teachings going on in New Haven at the time all the more incommensurable.

La Monte Young and Alvin Curran, through their respective relationships to John Cage, open up a much larger question: that of the displacement, the circulation of ideas, in their successive reconfigurations—by contamination, absorption, emptying...—in the context of the 1960s driven by a tropism toward the East and, more generally, stimulated by a search for the self through the exploration of the other. La Monte Young’s search led him to find otherness right in front of him, in downtown New York, as he dedicated his life to the teachings of Pandit Pran Nath. Alvin Curran’s search led him to reinvent himself by emigrating to Italy, a country he never left.





In August 1970, when La Monte Young was explaining his relationship to Cage in an interview with Daniel Caux, the composer's system of references was already shifting at a dizzying pace. It was now an Indian musician freshly emigrated to the US whom Young would invariably refer to: Pandit Pran Nath. Although the composer of the *The Well-Tuned Piano* attributes his discovery of Indian music to listening to an album by Ali Akbar Khan <sup>↳</sup> while studying music at UCLA in the mid-1950s,<sup>4</sup> it was not until 1967 that he heard the telluric voice of Pandit Pran Nath for the first time, thanks to a former pupil, Shyam Bhatnagar, who had brought back records of the master to the US. The discovery would turn Young's world upside down. Three years later, with his companion Marian Zazeela and Bhatnagar, Young received a grant that would allow him to bring Pandit Pran Nath to the US. In January 1970, Young and Zazeela formally became his disciples. In May of that same year, La Monte Young wrote an enthusiastic article about his new mentor in *The Village Voice*, "The Sound Is God," and on a trip to California introduced him to his friend Terry Riley, who in turn also became his disciple.

Born November 3, 1918 in Lahore, the capital of the province of Punjab (Pakistani since 1947), Pandit Pran Nath left home at 13 after

Pandit Pran Nath, *Colloquium I Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action*, Rothko Chapel, 1973. Courtesy of The Rothko Chapel, Photo: David Crossley

his mother made him choose between a career as a lawyer and one as a musician. Soon after, he met Abdul Wahid Khan, one of two great masters of the *Kirana gharana*, one of the leading schools of North Indian classical singing that, in its attention to tuning and the expressiveness of notes, aims at the perfect intonation of *swara* (the individual note, considered a musical world in itself). Renowned for his mastery of the *alap*—the slow, improvised section of the raga—Abdul Wahid Khan hired Pandit Pran Nath to be his servant; only after eight years would he be allowed to become his disciple. Pandit Pran Nath's extraordinary voice was broadcast for the first time in 1937 on All India Radio, yet legend has it that he chose to go live as a hermit, naked and covered only in ashes, in a cave in Tapkeshwar, where he would spend five years singing his religious fervor. Obeying the dying wishes of his master, Pandit Pran Nath ended up moving to Delhi in 1949 where he began teaching the *Kirana* and sharing his music with the world. Every account of the concerts he gave during those years describes a singer of exceptional talent who reduced his audience to silence, but also tells of an isolated, misunderstood musician, incongruent with Indian modernity. In the eyes of those who ruled India since 1947, Pandit Pran Nath indeed incarnated the perseverance of an aberration, an antediluvian system of oral transmission of music from master to disciple founded on initiation, repetition and memorization, incompatible with the transfer of its teachings to universities. Although Pandit Pran Nath taught Hindustani vocal music between 1960 and 1970 at the University of Delhi, he did it without enthusiasm, convinced that only an interpersonal relationship developed over a long period of time could ensure the transmission of the *dhrupad* and the *khayal*, two styles of classical North Indian singing to which he had dedicated his life. Marginalized in his own country that could not comprehend the “whims” of a musician who insisted on playing an evening raga only in the evening<sup>↳</sup>, and a day raga only during the day,<sup>5→</sup> admired by Young who perceived in Pran Nath the “pure” incarnation of a disappearing tradition, at 52 years old, Guruji<sup>↳6→</sup> (as his students affectionately called him) chose the path of exile and moved to New York, a place he knew nothing about.





Rome, January 1970. The strangeness Alvin Curran felt in the city that had welcomed him six winters earlier was beginning to dissipate.<sup>7→</sup> It must be said that the Musica Elettronica Viva (MEV) studio in Trastevere, St Paul's American church, Fabio Sargentini's Galleria l'Attico, and many other places in Rome were still reverberating with the innumerable concerts and performances Curran gave there, alone or collectively. In 1970, his compatriots Frederic Rzewski and Richard Teitelbaum,<sup>8→</sup> with whom he founded MEV, returned to the US. Yet Alvin Curran chose to stay, in the wake of the "revolutionary" wind of 1968. Already a memory. Now it was a wind from the East he felt blowing through the capital, a fascination for Eastern spirituality, a climate that favored regular visits from Pandit Pran Nath<sup>9→</sup> to Rome ↳.

Born in Providence, Rhode Island, on December 13, 1938, Alvin Curran holds musical memories from his childhood echoing those recounted by La Monte Young:<sup>10→</sup> an early fascination with environmental sounds (boat sirens, trains) and a love for the jazz of Art Tatum, Dizzy Gillespie, Gerry Mulligan, Dixieland, and the popular music of Broadway—in short, a repertory of authentic American music that he would later reinject into his own music. First, while at Brown studying with Ron Nelson, Curran discovered the Howard Hanson/Aaron Copland world of

*Music for Every Occasion. 51 Monophonic pieces by Alvin Curran.*  
Cover design by Edith Schloss (self-published, Rome, Italy 1971-1972). (republication by Experimental Music Catalogue, London, 1972?"1, 11 × 8 inches, 84 pp.

Americana, then, at Yale in 1960 with Elliott Carter, the twelve-tone technique of Schoenberg, expressive modernism and atonality. It is actually striking to note, during these stimulating years of study, the penetrating force of the intellectual structures that kept him apart from another branch of musicians, a family of outsiders that included Charles Ives, Harry Partch, and Conlon Nancarrow.<sup>11</sup>→ In 1963, he turned down a Fulbright scholarship to study with Luciano Berio, preferring instead to follow his professor Elliott Carter to Berlin as part of an exchange program called the DAAD (*Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst*). During his year in Berlin, he met Stockhausen, Pousseur, Kagel, Ligeti, and even Stravinsky, among others, yet none of these encounters seems to have provided him the fuel to plow his own furrow. In December 1964, almost on a whim, he moved to Rome. And it was within this specific context—a city with a Mediterranean culture, where he had difficulty deciphering the language and codes yet whose colors and sounds he absorbed—that the radical transformation took place.



A believer in just intonation, La Monte Young was fascinated with the harmonic development of sustained tones and the idea of a musical piece with no beginning, no development, and no end. In the 1960s he imagined his lifelong project, the *Dream House*, a permanent

Pandit Pran Nath with Terry Riley, La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, *Morning Ragas*, Rothko Chapel, 1981. Courtesy of The Rothko Chapel, Photo: David Crossley.

sound and light environment conceived as a veritable sanctuary from the outside world, living with his partner Marian Zazeela according to their own temporal cycle (27-hour days), building his work with legendary slowness; there is no doubt that Young would have considered Pandit Pran Nath an authority figure involved in preserving a “vectorial form of eternity”<sup>12→</sup> in the practice of music as a search for the absolute. In other words, La Monte Young’s work beckoned their encounter, whose most radical consequence, as Alexander Keefe notes in his essay *Lord of the Drone* ↪,<sup>13→</sup> lay undoubtedly in Young’s rejection of his own culture, in his utter submission to Guruji: Young invited him to live in his home, provided for all his material needs and, with a guarantee he would be able to pursue his own musical research, began a relationship of discipline and pure oral transmission ↪ that would end only with the death of the master, in 1996.<sup>14→</sup>

Through his association with La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela and Terry Riley, Pandit Pran Nath was propelled into the belly of the American avant-garde, an elite circle tied to the roots of the Dia Art Foundation and The Kitchen. Through contact with a handful of musicians (and no other than Henry Flynt, Christer Hennix, Yoshi Wada, Jon Hassell, Don Cherry, to name a few), his teachings became *ipso facto* associated with the story of the American musical *underground*, thus altering the historical arc drawn by the music that came out of Fluxus and minimalism.<sup>15→</sup>

Of course, the music of Pandit Pran Nath was not completely uncontaminated by his New York surroundings, but its silent transformation into a “post-minimalist liturgy”<sup>16→</sup> in the glow of light installations in Soho lofts still was driven towards even more austerity and slowness. In an era inclined to the crosspollination of ideas and experimenting with



MEV 2, Rome, 1971: Fabrizio Bertuccioli, Paolo Pace, Sandro Bernadoni, Alvin Curran, Yvonne Scholten, Carla Cassola.  
Photo: Alessandro Figurelli. All rights reserved.

practices, it is fascinating to see happening, at odds with the times, the making of a veritable myth of “purity” by his entourage, as well as the celebration of a custodian of a centuries-long tradition.

While Pandit Pran Nath seldom expressed himself in public, it is not difficult to imagine the violent uprooting his resettling in New York—only a few blocks from the NY Stock Exchange—must have brought about. In this respect, Alvin Curran’s writing about his own experience as an expatriate offers a complete picture of culture shock.<sup>17→</sup> When he moved to Rome at age 26,<sup>18→</sup> he confessed to having an innocent view of the world (and in particular the world of music). His precariousness and relative command of Italian, added to a slight degree of politicization, but also his frequenting of other expatriate Anglo-Saxon artists who very quickly formed a network of old and new acquaintances, placed him in a state of insularity as well as relative blindness within a city in full cultural and political exuberance. Paradoxically, it was these situations, sometimes rich in misunderstandings, and his peripheral position, that became the seedbed for his creativity.

Equipped with a recorder he used to capture nocturnal sounds from the Regina Coeli, the prison close to his first studio at *42 Via della Lungara*, regularly attending the new music concerts offered weekly by the RAI, flitting from discoveries to decisive encounters (Francesco Evangelisti, Giacinto Scelsi, Edith Schloss...), Curran set about unlearning everything he knew about music. And once he came into regular contact with British musician Cornelius Cardew (in Rome at the time on a study grant), he began to invest the word “composition” with meanings up until then unimaginable to him.<sup>19→</sup>

In a euphoric context of political agitation and utopian communities, where culture became a central preoccupation of the powerful PCI,<sup>20→</sup> Curran began, in the spring of 1966 along with two American expatriates, Frederic Rzewski and Richard Teitelbaum, to discover and explore the joys of improvisation. Joined by other American musicians,<sup>21→</sup> using found objects (springs, glass plates, elastic bands, oil drums), electronics (synthesizers, tapes), instruments and (harmonized) voices, and sometimes only their bodies, for hours they created cathartic, explosive music. *Musica Elettronica Viva (MEV)*, one of the most influential spontaneous music collectives of his generation, was born.<sup>22→</sup> For four years, Ivy League composers thus learned how to harness chaos by inviting their audiences (of non-musicians) to participate in the concerts by leaving out instruments and objects for them, with no one able to predict what would



come out of their high-wire experiments. In doing so, and even though MEV rejected all notion of authorship, the group was simultaneously testing out new musical strategies for channeling the energy released on stage while seeking to instill in participants a real capacity for listening that would allow them to merge with the broad strokes traced by the collective's musicians. Through its gradual transformations and the 300 concerts it held in Rome and then Europe up until 1970,<sup>23</sup> the collective thus achieved what Cage had never dared put into action: to smash the composition/improvisation, musician/non-musician oppositions.

MEV's ever more radical experimentation was stunning because in barely four years, the ideas that guided its creation led to an actual "musical suicide"<sup>24</sup> dissolving the very notion of the collective. Every one of its members returned to individual practice, so Curran could now pursue and amplify his love for the whispers of the world and conceive, among several working threads, a music that drew sounds from the environment into a "musical theater of the world."<sup>25</sup>

Openness to the other through the experience of the collective and awareness of what surrounds us, the autarkic creation of a musical universe imagined as a counterpoint to the world: these approaches, as divergent as they may be (centrifugal and radiating with Curran, centripetal and absorbing with Young), were nonetheless both electrified by a common wave that permeated the 1960s, that is, an urgent need to disentangle from the Western modernist musical heritage and reconnect with a primary notion of harmonic music as a form of transcendence.

Curran's disposition toward the other is precisely what prevents a parallel to be drawn between his insular experience during his first years in Rome and that of Pandit Pran Nath within a "coterie" in New York. The expatriation of the Indian master was first and foremost, by virtue of his key position as conveyor, a generator of future hybridities in the musical productions of his students. With Curran, a removal, a distance seems to have been the price he had to pay to be able to imagine another way of conceiving music. But—and it is Curran's long Roman trajectory that allows us to understand this—this new music invented at a key moment of rupture did not serve as a substitution for the music he studied. On the contrary: it served to amplify an existing repertory of music. Moreover, the expatriation at best created the conditions for, and at the very least revealed to Curran what he would call a "new common practice,"<sup>26</sup> that is, the disposition composers today—who have



seen ways of thinking, writing and playing music increase exponentially throughout the 20th century—should allow themselves to have, by alternating indiscriminately between free improvisation, orchestral composition, happenings, live electronics, tonality, harmony, dissonance, and more. In this sense, and without any irony, Curran (who still today defines himself as an “American composer”) maintains that his self-expatriation to Rome was crucial in rediscovering his American musical roots. That the few Roman musicians he connected with the most during his first years in Rome ended up being insular within their own culture shows that the hybridity in Curran’s work is not the outcome of a decentering: it is idiosyncratic.

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# Notes:

1. **The world is music** (Cage); **all music can be found within one sound** (Young). ←
2. "I think the music of John Cage represents the polar opposite of my music. One is positive, the other negative. According to John Cage, we exist, simply, and we must accept everything that surrounds us, art and music being assimilated to life. As for me [...] I think it's well known that it's necessary for there to be anarchy, a lack of control, total freedom, so that there can be the possibility of a completely defined structure, and absolute control: one cannot exist independently of the other because each is determined according to the extreme situation represented by the other. Thus it is necessary for the music of John Cage to exist so that mine can exist, and the fact that my music exists makes the music of John Cage all the more important." La Monte Young. "Interview with La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela", Jacqueline and Daniel Caux, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, August 1970, in *L'Art vivant*, n°30, May 1972. ←
3. During his residency at Wesleyan University, Cage was invited to present his music at Yale, not by the music department, but by the philosophy department. See Alvin Curran, "Onoffaboutunderaroundcage", 1999 in David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch, editors, **Writings through John Cage's Music, Poetry, and Art**. University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 177-179. ←
4. The album was **Music of India: Morning & Evening Ragas** (His Master's Voice, 1956) ←
5. A principle to which Pandit Pran Nath remained faithful. Here, the Malkauns raga played at midnight on August 21, 1976 in New York. ←
6. See **In Between The Notes**, a documentary portrait of Guruji by William Farley, from 1986. ←
7. "It should be clear, to avoid any misunderstanding, that foreign musicians —foreign artists— always remained foreign in Italy; Curran himself, during his first period in Italy, felt like a beautiful, fascinating 'pet' to be cuddled and coaxed, an otherly presence inside a spectacular art 'zoo'." Daniel Margoni Tortora, "66/67, Alvin's Train" p.17 in **Alvin Curran, Live in Roma** (edited by Daniela Margoni Tortora, Die Schachtel, 2010). ←
8. Frederic Rzewski, a graduate of Princeton, met Alvin Curran in Berlin in 1964 when he was already a well-known interpreter of the work of Stockhausen, Boulez, Pousseur, Maderna and Carter. Rzewski had been enthusiastic about Cage since meeting him in Buffalo in 1966. Richard Teitelbaum already knew Curran at Yale; he is the first person to have brought a Moog synthesizer to Europe. ←
9. Footage from one of Pandit Pran Nath's several Roman concerts that Alvin Curran would have attended in 1977. ←
10. Born in Bern, Idaho, on October 14, 1935, La Monte Young often spoke about his early obsession with the sound of the wind blowing around the logs of his parents' wood cabin, and against telephone poles. ←
11. When as a student he attended the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels, he would not even venture into the Philips pavilion (Le Corbusier/Xenakis/Varèse). ←
12. An expression l'"forme vectrice d'éternité"l coined by Jacqueline Caux in **La Monte Young, The Man and His Music**, a conference held October 12, 2015, at The Arts Arena, Columbia Global Centers, Paris. ←
13. Alexander Keefe, "Lord of the Drone: Pandit Pran Nath and The American Underground", **Bidoun Magazine**, 2010. ←
14. In a radio interview from 1987 with Russ Jennings, La Monte Young revisits his learning. ←
15. In a video by Benjamin Plekut, Henry Flynt recalls one of Pandit Pran Nath's first concerts in New York, in 1970 ↪; Young perpetuating, in 2014, his master's legacy with his project The Just Alap Raga Ensemble ↪ ←
16. Alexander Keefe, *op. cit.* ←
17. **A Guided Tour Through Twelve Years of American Music in Rome, Soundings**, n°10, Soundings Press, Santa Fe, 1976, or **Permesso di soggiorno, an Opera in Several Acts**, in **Alvin Curran, Live in Roma** (edited by Daniela Margoni Tortora, Die Schachtel, 2010). ←
18. Exactly half Pandit Pran Nath's age when he left Delhi. ←
19. Curran's point of view is summed up in this quote: "I consider any act of music making, whether it be composing or improvising, an act of composing. One is in real time; one is in deferred time, that's all there is to it." (Alvin Curran, **Live in Roma**, p. 152) ←
20. A specific study on the key role and financing of cultural activities by the American Academy and St Paul's American church is worth undertaking, in a comparison with the activities of the Ford Foundation that financed the DAAD program in Berlin. ←
21. Allan Bryant (synthesizer), Carol Plantamura (vocals), Jon Phetteplace (cello) and the Italian Ivan Vandor (saxophone). ←
22. At the very moment the AMM, The Scratch Orchestra, Nuova Consonanza, Sonic Arts Union, and San Francisco Tape Music Center collectives were born. ←



23. An excerpt from a concert held in Cologne in 1967 of *Spacecraft* an improvised piece guided by a few instructions given by Rzewski, which MEV played a number of times in its early years (with different results at each performance), can be found here: [↪](#); the piece in its entirety was published in 1970 by Mainstreams Records, in a collection conducted by Earle Brown: *MEV/AMM, Live Electronic Music Improvised*. Here [↪](#), a *live* excerpt from *Sound Pool*, a piece played as of 1969. The piece was to be played according to the following instructions addressed to the audience: "Bring a sound, cast it in the pool!" (*The Sound Pool*, BYG Records, 1970.) ←
24. "The point I am trying to make is that the autonomous structure of the individual group was beginning to crumble. We saw it, then Frederic [Rzewski] again with a gesture of, you could say creative, but you could say destructive genius, imagined that we were ripe for a real revolutionary step: killing our own music, and destroying it as a group. Creating group suicide musically by allowing an entire public to become part of our concert, part of our evolution." (Alvin Curran, *Live in Roma*, p.157.) ←
25. David Sanson, *La Magie et la joie, entretien avec Alvin Curran*, November 1, 2011. ←
26. Alvin Curran, *The New Common Practice*, Mills College, 1994. ←

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# *Archive-Practice*

Marianna Hovhannisyan

**III-**

*Archive-Practice* is a research-based curatorial project by Marianna Hovhannisyan (2008-ongoing). It focuses on curating a contemporary art collection as an environmental and archaeological set of relations, in which a collection of artifacts and interviews with artists takes the form of “a book that doesn’t exist yet, set within a dialogue that does.”

The project works with past initiatives by Armenian artists/curators who established alternative creative practices and institutions through the 1990s, in the early stages of independent/post-Soviet Armenia. I have produced a series of audio/video interviews with artists and selected subject-related artifacts to form the collection that serves as the project core, thus activating the contemporary state of now-absent past initiatives—failed, forgotten, and fragmented. Through this unregistered history, the project opens up a new space of enquiry and methodology, where the collection becomes a record of “unfinishedness” attached to the project of identity of the neoliberal state of Armenia, and the ways these “absences” are matched by “unattended objects”—the markers of artistic practices.



## # 12 In Between Lines

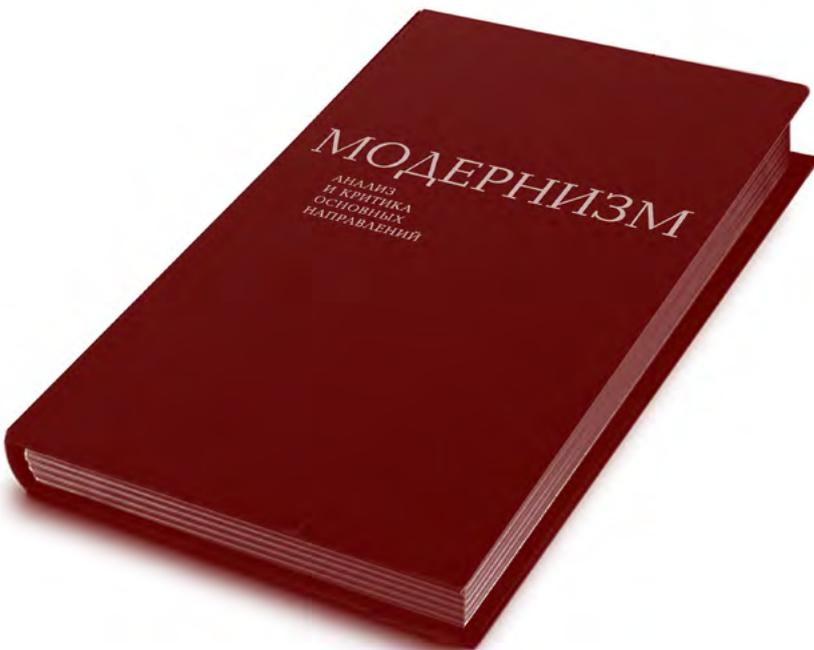
Artifact: Модернизм. Анализ и критика основных направлений (*Modernism: Analysis and Critique of Main Tendencies*) book, 1972<sup>1</sup> →

Contributor: Artist Grigor Khachatryan, 2011

*Modernism: Analysis and Critique of Main Tendencies* book-artifact from the collection of *Archive-Practice* curatorial project is the marker of reading in between lines—a common practice among several artists in the 1970s in the Soviet Union and in Soviet Armenia.

The book was published in 1969 by “Art” publisher in Moscow and edited by Y. Kollinskih and V. Vanslov. It was reprinted many times—in 1972, 1980, and 1987, as it had a demand. It was an anthology of articles written in Russian about the 20th century modernist tendencies of art developed in the West, such as Expressionism, Cubism, Fauvism and so on. The anthology was an “official” linguistic, theoretical criticism from the socialist positions, where the set of articles and opinions criticized the so-called Western tendencies in art from the Soviet ideological perspective of art history. Paradoxically, this book served as a turning point for some artists living in the Soviet Union to grasp and to be influenced by modernist ideas through reading their negative criticism.

As contemporary artist Grigor Khachatryan from Armenia states in his interview (2011): “My perceptions changed dramatically when I read a book about bourgeois dissident art called Модернизм. Анализ и критика основных направлений (*Modernism: Analysis and Critique of Main Tendencies* published in 1972). It was from the viewpoint of socialist realism, an entirely Soviet art criticism, but we were used to reading between the lines.”



Audio/video interview with artist Grigor Khachatryan on August 17, 2011, in Yerevan.

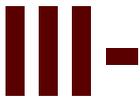
Marianna Hovhannisyan: Reflecting on the chronological and ideological development of your artistic practice, what can we consider to be the relationship between *Grigor Khachatryan*—an artist who performatively articulates his name as *the contemporary*—and Grigor Khachatryan, who since 2003 has been involved in educational work?

Grigor Khachatryan: The school I'm familiar with was during the Soviet Union—the school of dread and fear. Though I spent my student years mocking the educational process, I was laughing at the absurdness called “Soviet.” It was why I was kicked out of university in 1976, and why I had to apply a second time in 1980. For about twenty, twenty-five years after graduating, I kept jumping up in my sleep, dreaming about being back in school and my university years. My mocking was a kind of involuntary performative form of resistance long before I encountered it in the field of arts.

My friends and my involvement in educational activities at the Mkhitar Sebastatsi Educational Complex in the suburbs of the city could be considered an escape from the center of Yerevan, like an exile, a political asylum. I can't say either that we were looking for comfort. One needs an independent source of power in order to avoid the path of falsification and comfort in art. Nowadays students are free from the nightmares of school during the Soviet Union; we arm the students with professional skills, with social and cultural values, and we send them like disciples into their homes, streets and yards, so they can shatter their friends' and parents' perceptions of art.

*Grigor Khachatryan* before 1972—that is, before I turned twenty—is when I studied the arts by reading, painting and imitating Picasso, the Fauvists and the Impressionists, and the Renaissance period. This was what was accepted by the Soviet Union, and why it was available to us.

My perceptions changed dramatically when I read a book about bourgeois dissident art called Модернизм. Анализ и критика основных направлений (*Modernism: Analysis and Critique of Main Tendencies published in 1972*).<sup>2→</sup> It was from the viewpoint of socialist realism—it was entirely Soviet art criticism, but we were used to reading between the lines.



In 1973 I began to receive a Polish magazine I had long desired called *projekt*—the reason for my interest in posters up to this day. At the back of the magazine there was a Russian translation of the texts, and when I read these interviews, I was truly surprised to discover how it was possible to interview an artist! It was completely different—some kind of revelation for a reader of Soviet art history. I understood at that moment that until then I had been filling my brain with empty, nonsensical things. The cultural and informational blockade had been smashed. Also, being beatniks, we were already obsessed with hard rock concerts, which in Yerevan took place nearly every day, and which could be heard from our art studios in the evenings.

The first significant works for me were in 1972. These were performances with my artist friend Suren Navasardyan and my musician friend Gagik Harutyunyan. They took place where the Hayastan shopping center is now. Near the big clock at the traffic crossing, we rented a studio, where we prepared for the Pedagogical Institute entrance exams.

It was a *subbotnik*,<sup>3</sup> which was dedicated to May 1st. At the entrance to the studio, I hung a five-meter wind-torn banner that read “Ketse!”.<sup>4</sup> Standing on the balcony of the studio I read out the May 1st slogans that filled every page of the *Soviet Armenia* newspaper’s May 1st edition. At the same time, Suren and Gagik were shoveling construction waste into a truck parked directly below the balcony. Every slogan I read equaled one shovel of rubbish and one minute of applause. Laborers whose shovels we had borrowed also joined in.

Our next performance was at the same place, during a military parade. We attached a piece of paper to a brush like a flag, stood next to the soldier leading the march and shouted out orders just like him. Our public performances at the entrance of the studio continued until we were kicked out of the place.

In 1973, I was obsessed with Modernism. Eight paintings remain that were never exhibited; it was forbidden to show such things at the time, and besides it was somehow anachronistic. Between 1974 and 1990 I engaged only in abstraction—I mean, until the contemporary art scene developed in Armenia, for example, with a group of artists in the 1980s called Մև քառակուսի (*Sev Qarakusi*, in English “Black Square”), Միջուկային կենտրոն (*Mijukayin kentron*, in English “Nuclear Centre”), and later *The 3rd Floor*. I did not join *The 3rd Floor*<sup>5</sup> when they first began because their early work reminded me of my 1972 performances—a phase I had already passed. It was only later that I participated in their exhibits.





Grigor Khachatryan  
"Grigor Khachatryan" Prize  
The physical test of "Grigor Khachatryan" Prize  
by Ashot Hovhannisyan, 1974

Awarding "Grigor Khachatryan"  
Prize to Georgian artist Nadia Tsulukidze, 2007  
Image: Courtesy of the Artist

28  
Rueben 10 nos 5 nr 67  
cerampan 12 ug 37/64



An image of *projekt* Polish magazine, April 1975  
Image: Courtesy of Grigor Khachatryan



# III-

Grigor Khachatryan  
*Official Meetings, 2008 - ongoing*  
Photo series of performances

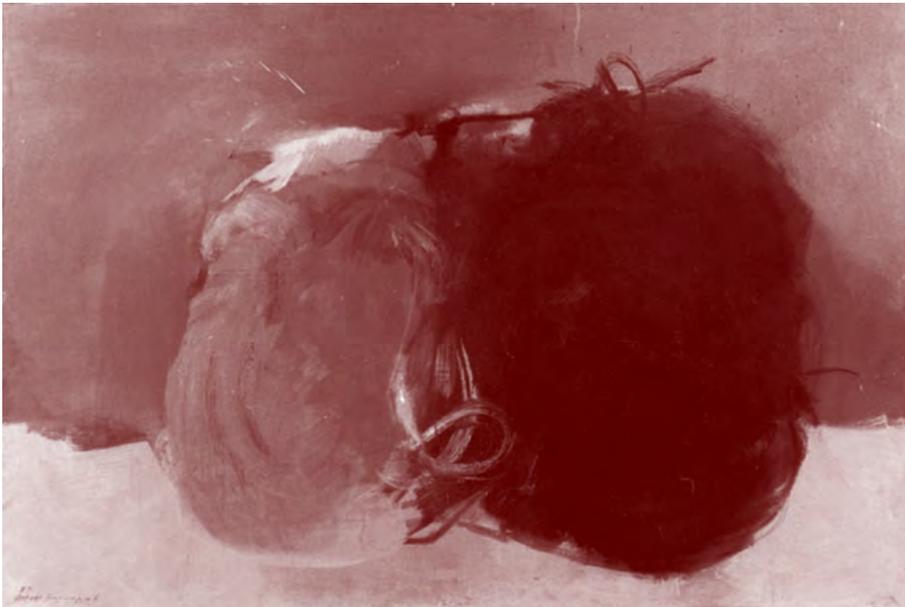


Grigor Khachatryan  
*A Head*, 1973  
Oil on cardboard, 49,5 × 35 cm  
Image: Courtesy of the Artist



Grigor Khachatryan  
*Paintings-1*, 1974  
Oil on canvas, 60 × 80 cm  
Image: Courtesy of the Artist

### III-



Grigor Khachatryan  
*Paintings-1*, 1989  
Oil on canvas, 114 × 156 cm  
Image: Courtesy of the Artist

MH: In your work relating to contemporary art since 1991, mass media and performance were the main modes of expression. How did you shape the relationship between the means and methods you were developing at that time, and concepts that needed urgent addressing? I am thinking specifically of your lengthy experience with AR TV (1996-2001) as an artistic director. You were also art director for Գարուն (*Garoun*),<sup>6</sup> an alternative magazine, from 1987 to 1996.

GKH: Reading Immanuel Kant's *Aesthetics* in 1980, I came across the statement "Art is purposiveness without a purpose." This statement guided me for a long time. Subsequently, I compared my actions to those of a child. When a child is curious about something, he just points it out and tries to draw attention to it; to turn the invisible into the visible, the intangible into the tangible, the understandable into the mis-understandable, and vice versa. We just need to find the appropriate means of expression. It can be a video, a performance, an installation, a painting, or a poster with text. An artist needs to figure out not what he wants, but what form is required. It is highly important to alienate yourself maximally, no matter how complicated it may be, because you are always subordinate to aesthetic norms, and your work will derive from that influence. In this situation, you will not contribute properly to disentangling the concept. You should recognize that you are free because you are making visible and tangible what no one else has noticed or made understandable before. The feeling of your freedom lasts until the completion of the work, and sometimes afterwards, when on occasion you come across the work.

For a long time, I was satisfied with my work in *Garoun* magazine. I liked how the work of art rapidly proliferated. It allowed for a deep interaction and communication with society... and TV was even faster, and more influential. Nowadays we have no cultural magazines, no cultural TV shows where contemporary art, artists, works of art, analysis and criticism can be presented. At the moment there is one exception—a new online magazine called *Arteria*<sup>137</sup>. I think it's very important that the discourse be open to large circles of society, otherwise we would only have an elitist discourse of art.

We need to demolish the borders between art and life, consciousness and sub-consciousness. We need total art and cultural dictatorship. At *Garoun* magazine I presented all *The 3rd Floor* exhibitions, and always contemporary artists. With art critic and curator Nazareth Karoyan



we made the *EX VOTO* cultural pages. For AR TV, I presented contemporary art as well as contemporary artists, and nearly all the exhibitions, and musical and theatre projects at the NPAK.<sup>8</sup>→ Video art and films about artists that were shown on AR TV are now kept at the Centre Pompidou's National Museum of Modern Art in France. The film project *Քաղաք (Qaghag, in English "City")*↳ was also made with the support of AR TV, and some of these films were recently bought by the Museum of Art in Lodz, Poland. With the help of curator and art critic Ruben Arevshatyan we created the cultural TV show "Արիստոտել" (Aristotle), with cultural theoretician Vardan Jaloyan we made the cultural broadcast "Դիվադար" (Divadar) and with Karen Mkhitryan the "Ուրբաթախոս (Էսսեներ)՝ նորագույն ավանդապատումներ", *Urbatakhos*, (Essays/Newest Tales) broadcast with artist Arman Grigoryan we made an art history broadcast called "Veda" — and all of this thanks to enthusiasm! You see, Marianna, right now I'm also shocked at how much was done! If you add up all the TV programs today, together they wouldn't come close to having as many cultural broadcasts as we had—and we're not even talking about their quality! Nowadays, there are some indications, we can expect things, on networks and the internet. That is why many political forces are considering censorship and restrictions.



Grigor Khachatryan

An installation of the history of *Caroun* magazine

*Future in the Past* exhibition, Kalents Museum, Yerevan, 2014

Image: Courtesy of the Artist



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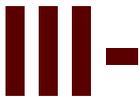
Grigor Khachatryan  
*Garoun* magazine cover-design by Grigor Khachatryan, March, 1992  
Image: Courtesy of the Artist

MH: In order to make all these critical practices available to society, we need, for example, state awareness in the form of specific elaborated programs, which are absent in Armenia. There are a few initiatives, but always from the inside—decentralized and marginal. Where do you see a solution now for accessibility, since in the 1990s at least the communication and interrelation with communities of interest and public spheres were regular and direct—due, indeed, to the enthusiasm of contemporary artists and their diverse and multifaceted propositions, projects, and so on?

GKH: At last, we come to the politics that exist in Armenia. Nearly all contemporary artists believe that we need revolution in order to have a democratic country; the other representatives with their actions and silence serve only the criminal-oligarchic class. In art there is a relationship between the private and public sectors and it is necessary that the dialogue between these two becomes closer. It is necessary for mass media to be independent and free, but this is impossible under the current authorities. Contemporary art is politicized art by necessity—either it is politicized, or it is not contemporary.

MH: In the 1990s the establishment and occupation of new territories were essential. Though it always strikes me that there has never been a comprehensive collaboration or relationship with the establishment—with fine arts or academic institutions, or the ministry of culture, for example. The contemporary artists who created the art scene of the 1990s are still today in some sort of marginal state. Were there any discussions or plans in the 1990s to build relationships with the state or academia, since at that time a spirit of cultural change was underway?

GKH: I can only describe what there was in the 1990s, and what there is not now. The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Armenia organized an exhibition in Bochum, Germany [1995], where our contemporary art was exhibited perfectly. Later, it was exhibited in Moscow. That was when the NPAK was created, and it was granted permission to present Armenia at the 46th Venice Biennale for the first time.<sup>9></sup> Then the Hay-Art Cultural Center<sup>10></sup> opened, which brought with it a range of important



projects. In the Museum of Literature, the galleries of Nazareth Karoyan, Charlie Khachatryan and Tatul Arakyan opened one after the other. *The 3rd Floor* almost completely occupied the Artists Union, and the Gyumri International Biennial of Contemporary Art was founded [in 1997]—and the Modern Art Museum of Yerevan<sup>11</sup> had already opened long before. Today, the Hay-Art Cultural Center no longer exists, and handing the Modern Art Museum to a brother meant that he treated it like his own home... it could be called The Henrik Igityan Collection, but it is not a museum of modern art. In 1991, I regretfully declined to donate my works to the Modern Art Museum's permanent exhibition because by then it had already become irrelevant to its name—even though I had aspired to be exhibited there, and they had once held important exhibitions. The existence of the NPAK depends on the good will of the authorities and it is financed by donors, whereas the Gyumri Biennial and the National Association of Art Critics [founded in 2005], receive no support from the state. This sad situation first emerged as the authoritarian regime was forming in 2008. A1+ channel was closed [in 2002] and the rest [of the media] became easily controlled. Contemporary art and its representatives are a real headache for these authorities. They want to get rid of us, or make us nationalistic servants to the tastes and displays of false patriotism. It is these devotees to contemporary art who are creating the art scene, and presenting it both here and to the outside, while the Ministry of Culture of Armenia is busy organizing extravagant events and anniversaries.

**MH:** The “*I Am Grigor Khachatryan*” manifesto was a turning point in your biography as an artist. It signaled a turning away from traditional art forms towards more conceptual positions and practices. Were there already preconditions that existed for it—for example, Armenia's independence from the Soviet Union and the political context at the beginning of the 1990s<sup>12</sup>—or was it a gradual transition towards exploring a new, different space?

**GKH:** Traditional artists shed salty tears when they bid farewell to painting and drawing, whereas artists on the other bank are still applauding loudly. From 1970 until 1996, I rented art studios in different parts of the city, but starting in 1990 I didn't need to do so because the art and art studios began moving with *Grigor Khachatryan*. I started to use the material and objects around me, the things we live with and in. Art is not just a picture



hanging on a wall, it is an environment. I reconnected with the performances of 1972, which had no continuation because of the absence of a contemporary milieu. Yes, the prerequisites were created by our active participation, and I don't mean to make the reasons sound grandiloquent, but it was due to a common concern about the future of the country. Nationalistic problems, which resulted from the war condition, were important for many people, but for most of the artists, the building of an open society was never secondary. There was some horizontal communication with many state members who politely accepted the criticism directed at them, not only in the mass media but also in public places.

At the annual exhibition of the Union of Artists entitled *Exhibition of One Work*, every member had the right to exhibit one work of his or her choice. This was in 1990. The *Manifesto* was exhibited for two or three days, and then it was removed because a woman said it was a disgrace. The *Manifesto* was about total openness, about not being hidden and not hiding—it was a rejection of secrets and the disavowal of knowledge gained from eating the forbidden fruit. It was about accountability for being naked, and simply, most importantly, about not prioritizing the nakedness.

I think the *Manifesto* was important: you have no place of retreat, you have not given yourself room to change, and no clothes will save you. I think the manifestation of the rejection of wisdom by refusing the apple of Eden was behind the formation and subsequent dissolution of the *Party of Fools*<sup>13</sup> that existed in the form of articles, including a series of press statements issued in the 1990s. I dissolved the *Party* by joining the government, by writing statements and declarations announcing how well they assumed the titles and carried on the functions of a party of fools.

Everybody has the right to be a fool, and let there be nothing except common sense upon our altar of freedom.



Grigor Khachatryan  
*Manifesto*, 1990

"I am not a man, I am Grigor Khachatryan, you are not men, you are Grigor Khachatryan's contemporary. Grigor Khachatryan a name high and delightful."

Image: Courtesy of the Artist

Grigor Khachatryan (1952) works and lives in Yerevan. Khachatryan has played a prominent role in the development of the contemporary, alternative art scene in Armenia. Since the early 1990s his artistic practice has been focused on his name and body as the main concepts of his art works and projects ("*Grigor Khachatryan*" Prize since 1974 or *Manifesto*, 1990). He is known for his radical performances and public actions, as well as for long-term projects such as *The International Center of Planning Accidents* or his engagement in the mass media field. Khachatryan was the art editor of *Caroun* magazine (1987-1996) and the artistic director of AR TV Company (1996-2002). He works at the Fine Arts High-School at Mkhitar Sebastatsi educational complex as a master designer. Selected exhibitions include: *Future in the Past*, Kalentz Museum (Yerevan, 2014); Stiftung Deutsches Historisches Museum (2012); the 54th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, Armenian Pavilion (2011); *From Armenia...* (Quimper, 2007), the 20th International *Poster* Biennial of Warsaw (2006); *Adieu Parajanov* (Vienna, 2003), as well as *Parallel reality* exhibition in the Hay-Art Cultural Center and the 1st International Biennial of Gyumri (1998).



Translators: Christopher Gasparian and Lusine Hovhannisyan. Special thanks to Fareed Armaly, Samvel Baghdasaryan, Grigor Khachatryan and Elodie Royer for their support in various ways.

# Notes:

1. The first edition dates back to 1969. The current title is translated from Russian. ←
2. *ibid.* ←
3. Subbotniks were days of community and volunteer work in the Soviet Union. ←
4. "Hurrah!" in Armenian. ←
5. The most active period of the **The 3rd Floor** (sometimes called a group, sometimes an artistic-cultural movement) was from 1987 to 1994. Its name came from the first happening-intervention that took place on the third floor of the Artists' Union in Yerevan in 1987. As art historian Vardan Azatyan argues, its creation was anchored in the context of Perestroika. **The 3rd Floor** drew together a group of artists, writers, musicians and theoreticians to resist the dominant ideological traditions of socialist realism, through happenings, performances, manifestos, and an artistic approach to painting using expressive gestures and intentions. ←
6. "Spring" in Armenian. The independent, literary, cultural and social magazine founded in 1967. ←
7. Available at <http://www.arteria.am> ↪. ←
8. The Center for Contemporary Experimental Art or ACCEA, known as NPAK, was officially founded in 1994. See <http://www.accea.info/en> ↪. ←
9. In 1995, the first official pavilion of the Republic of Armenia at the Venice Biennale was organized by the NPAK, presenting the work of artists Samvel Baghdasaryan and Karen Andreasian. ←
10. The Hay-Art Cultural Center (1997-2004, artistic director Ruben Arevshatyan) was one of the largest contemporary art centers in Yerevan initiated and run by the local artistic community. For years it produced collaborative projects within the local art scene, and within an international network. In 2004, the municipality of Yerevan closed down the cultural center. Nowadays the center holds occasional exhibitions. ←
11. The Modern Art Museum of Yerevan was founded in 1972 by art historian Henrik Igityan (director of the museum until 2009) and with the strong support of Armenian artists active in the 1960s (considered late modernists). It was the first modern art museum in the entire Soviet bloc. Various generations of artists from the 1960s until today have based their artistic biographies and practices on either their direct or indirect relationship to the museum, or their opposition to and criticism of its position in the development of art in Armenia after the 1980s. For the museum's current activities, see <http://www.mamy.am> ↪. ←
12. In reference to Perestroika, the Nagorno-Karabakh war, and the new economic and cultural development of Armenia towards the definition of a democratic, open society. ←
13. A performance project by Grigor Khachatryan created in 2006. ←



# The Construction of the (Art) Institution in China and the Artists' Strategies of Active Withdrawal

Biljana Ciric

## IV-

# 51

# The museum, the modern and interrupted modernist attempts at withdrawal

The first domestically conceived museum in China was established in 1905 by Zhang Jian, in the town of Nantong in Jiangsu Province—today a two hour bus ride from Shanghai. Zhang Jian was a local entrepreneur and reformist, and in 1895 he proposed to the Qing Dynasty Court the idea of building a museum in the capital city of Beijing, as well as in each province across the country.

China's period of colonial governance during the 19th century eventually forced the Chinese elite to consider possible ways to strengthen the country and its sense of nationalism in the aftermath of that period. The idea of the so-called "modern" in the early 20th century, as part of Zhang Jian's vision, not only translated to the creation of the museum complex, but also a whole set of other institutions that he built in Nantong as the ideal modern city, a "model city," which included jails, hospitals, schools, factories, and the museum, among others. His idea of the museum was very much informed by the model of the colonial museums built in Shanghai—one such was established in 1868 by Jesuits in Shanghai, called the Heude Museum, while the Shanghai Museum was established by the Royal Asiatic Society North China Branch during the mid-19th century. This interest in museums as institutions intertwined a number of complicated desires, including the repatriation of the country's heritage (which had been previously undermined by colonial powers or taken abroad); the solidification of this knowledge in local contexts; the re-appropriation of the Linnaean classification system that these early museums introduced in their attempts to better understand and catalogue all that is and was China; and, at the same time, a move towards the vision cultivated by the Chinese elite of creating a stronger country through different institutional constructs, collecting practices, and interpretation of the relationship between an object and its classificatory grouping.

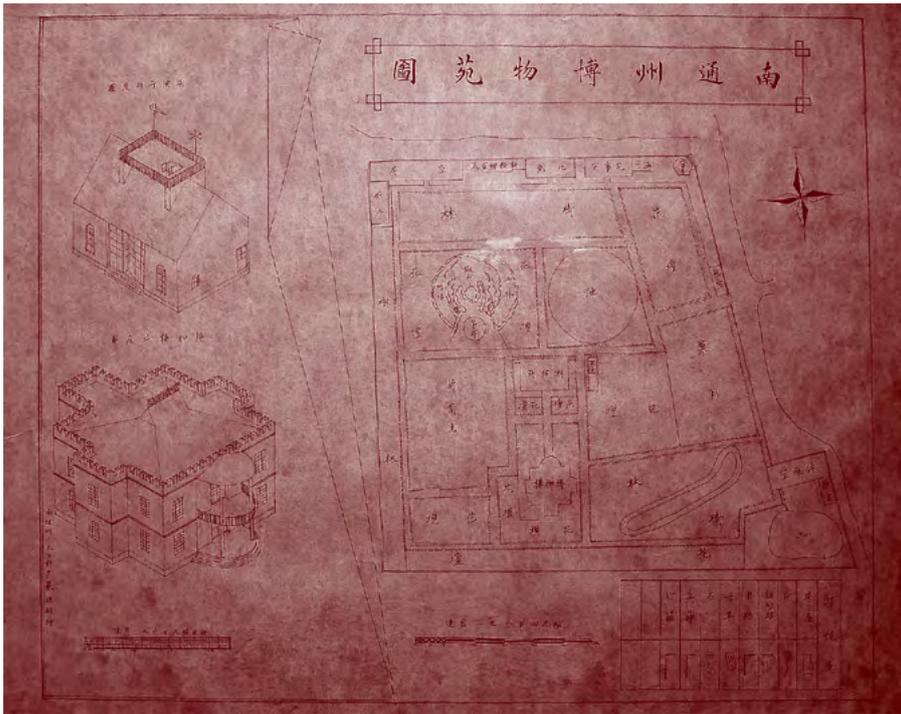
These early museums established by foreign entities could be described as natural history museums, in a certain sense, which also occasionally presented exhibitions of traditional Chinese painting and porcelain. In these early museums, one can clearly identify a strong con-

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nection to the tradition of the Natural History Museum as conceived in Europe, as well as the so-called “curiosity cabinets” of the 19th century, which attempted to present the world as a singular whole and likewise examined China as such.

Today, the only surviving remnant of the Nantong Museum is the building itself, as most of the objects were destroyed during the Sino-Japanese War and later during the Cultural Revolution. As a result, Zhang Jian’s vision of the museum to “preserve the past and enlighten the future” remains a largely unrealised initiative today.

Zhang Jian’s museum in Nantong had a strong focus on the natural world, but also displayed his personal collection, which included different objects including paintings and historical artifacts, allowing for a more complex presentation than the other colonial natural history museums.



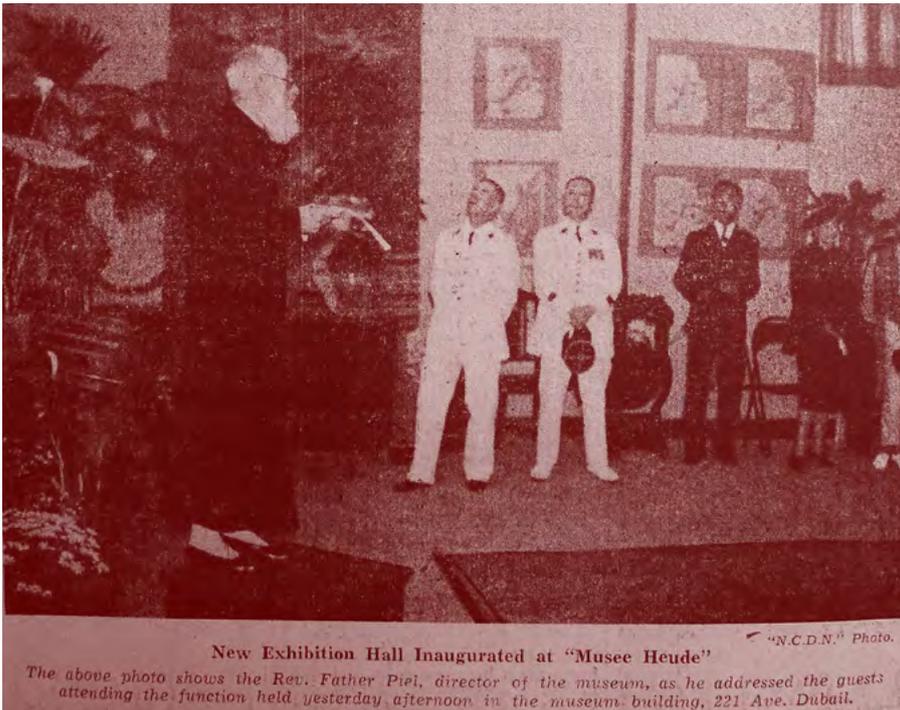
The Chinese term for “museum,” from the beginning, was open to different interpretations as a result of its translation. The Chinese term, *bo wuyuan*, was used prominently at the end of the 19th century to articulate the relatively new idea of the museum, which author Lisa Claypool has translated as: “Hall for the Study of Things.”<sup>1</sup> This definition is rather different from today’s word used for the art museum: *mei shuguan*, which

Nan Tong Museum  
Floor plan drawing by Yan Naizhao  
1908  
Courtesy of Nan Tong Museum

in English would mean something like Fine Arts Hall. (This term—*mei shuguan*—was first used in the title of Yan Zhikai's Tianjin City Art Museum, which was open to the public between 1930 and 1937.)

The abovementioned term, *bo wuyuan*, however, was primarily used by the British and Jesuits, while Zhang Jian would eventually name his museum complex: *Bo Wu Yuan*, wherein *yuan* in this context refers to a garden, which was in fact part of the original complex. Another term used by Zhang Jian was *Bolan Guan*, which cultural historian Claypool has translated as “hall for the studious and adventuring eye,” thereby emphasising the act of viewing over pure intellectual study. These various early translations of the concept of the museum also affected an understanding of the museum's role. For instance, this separation of the relationship between viewing and studying clearly affected the development of the field of museology during the early phases of modernism, especially in the context of the conception of the art museum, where scholarship and the research of objects has been a marginalised activity up until today.

These early museums didn't have much interaction with the artists of their time but correspondence shows that they had a great deal of exchange with foreign institutions around the world. Although the exhibitions of those artists who were bringing about a new wave of thinking about art—and its relation to society—were not hosted in these museums, institutional records reveal that these museums had extremely high levels of visitor attendance.



New Exhibition Hall Inaugurated at "Musee Heude"

"N.C.D.N." Photo.

The above photo shows the Rev. Father Piel, director of the museum, as he addressed the guests attending the function held yesterday afternoon in the museum building, 221 Ave. Dubail.

The North-China Daily News, Sunday, May 21st, 1939, page 6

New Exhibition Hall Inaugurated at Musee Heude

Newspaper caption: "The above photo shows the Rev. Father Piel, director of the museum as he addresses the guests attending the function held yesterday afternoon in the museum building 221. Av. Dubail"

*The Daily News* from May 1939 writes: "The exposition organized by Heude Museum to commemorate the 70th anniversary of its foundation continues to have outstanding success. Every day, even before the opening of the doors, there is a long queue of people waiting and those who rush to various exhibition halls. 55,000 entrants have been registered for the first week."<sup>2</sup>→

This reality created very different conditions for the development of modern art within local contexts, especially when compared to the West, where the rise of modern art, its museums, and study of art history were very much interconnected (the most obvious example being the establishment of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929). These relationships and rituals, as Hal Foster states, created the illusion of institutional autonomy, which the practice of art and its history needed at the time. In the Chinese context, modernist movements in the early 20th century, and again, later in the 1980s, remained disconnected from the museum as an instrumental institution and voice of art historical narrative.

A number of painters who returned home from their studies abroad—primarily in Japan and France—began organising themselves into societies, such was the case with Storm Society, initiated by Pang Xunqin and Ni Yide in Shanghai in 1931, as well as the Chinese Independent Art Association, established in Tokyo in 1934 by Chinese students. In 1932, the artists of Storm Society organised their first exhibition in Shanghai's Chinese Art Students Society, which was imagined to have a great impact on the local art scene but which instead seems to have had little impact and very few visitors.

The Storm Society manifesto stated the following:

We detest all old forms, old colors; we detest all common and vulgar techniques. We wish to use new methods to express the spirit of a new age.

The artistic world of 20th century Europe has seen the burgeoning of new phenomena—the outcry of the Fauvists, the distortion of the Cubists, the violence of Dadaism, the fantasies of Surrealism...

The artistic world of 20th century China too must see the growth of new phenomena...

Let us arise! With hurricane-like emotions and steel-like intellect, we shall create a crisscross world of color, line, and form!

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As we can read from this manifesto, the introduction to Western culture came to greatly influence the debate around the country concerning art during the second decade of the 20th century. According to author and historian Ralph Croizier,<sup>32</sup> the so-called modernist movement was introduced to China during this period and would quickly disappear due to anti-Japanese sentiment that resulted from the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), as well as the Chinese Civil War, and later also dismissed due to the highly ideological shaping of the role of art after 1949 and during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). It was only to again be revived during the early avant-garde movements of the 1980s.

Changes within the larger social and political contexts of China would eventually force a number of artists toward actions of withdrawal, shaping not only their artistic practice but their very existence in society and public role. This was largely determined by their desire to move away from ideologically-based imagery and political instrumentalisation, which became the mainstream in the art historical narrative beginning in the 1940s.

Strategies of withdrawal as discussed in the context of contemporary art are usually linked to the experimentation of the early 1980s. However, I would like to propose a further connection with the early 20th century debates between academic realist painters who adopted the Western painting model as a symbol of scientific excellence and progress—which would later on serve the revolutionary causes—and the modernist painters of that time, especially members of the groups Storm Society in Shanghai (1932–36), and the Chinese Independent Art Association that was active in Tokyo and in Guangzhou during the mid-1930s (the first exhibition in Guangzhou was organized in 1935).

The debate in China related to modernism focused on the style of Xu Beihong—a representative of academic realism who also studied in France—and his belief that painting should be of a realist nature, as a symbol of scientific excellence and progress. But the generation of artists that returned from studying abroad in the late 1920s would further stoke the fire of this debate by establishing the abovementioned societies and exhibitions of their work.

The members of these two societies proposed a withdrawal from the imitation of the world around them, thereby moving away from academic realism, and developing their own expression through “colors, line and forms,” as the Storm Society members articulated in their manifesto and one of the main trends of the early modernist move-

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ment. However, members of both societies who were active during 1930s, and advocates of individualist expression, would soon encounter the conditions of the anti-Japanese war, wherein artists and intellectuals of all types carried the burden to serve the country and promote a strong nationalistic character through their work.

As Ralph Croizier detailed in his text, *Post-Impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai: The Juelanshe (Storm Society) and the Fate of Modernism in Republican China*, the members of Storm Society rejected the idea that painting should serve politics by making images that the greater masses could easily recognise. But that did not mean that the artists were at all satisfied with the other status quo and thus proposed a revolution of individuality and individual consciousness.

What this small group of modernist painters proposed at that time can today be described as a withdrawal into art itself, and from within art there was the possibility to explore a greater resonance between art and the social. To further shed light on these movements, it should also be noted that many of the members of these two groups were also early members of the Communist Youth League during the 1920s. By proposing abstraction or non-representative image-based work, these groups leaned towards an experimental approach that directly related to their time in places like Tokyo and Paris—including exposure to Cubism, Dada and Surrealism—and led to a withdrawal from the representational that today is usually discussed in the context of the avant-garde movement of the 1980s. These tendencies towards abstraction in the early 1920s and 30s would eventually be interrupted by the war with Japan, and the artists' new role in the service of the nation.

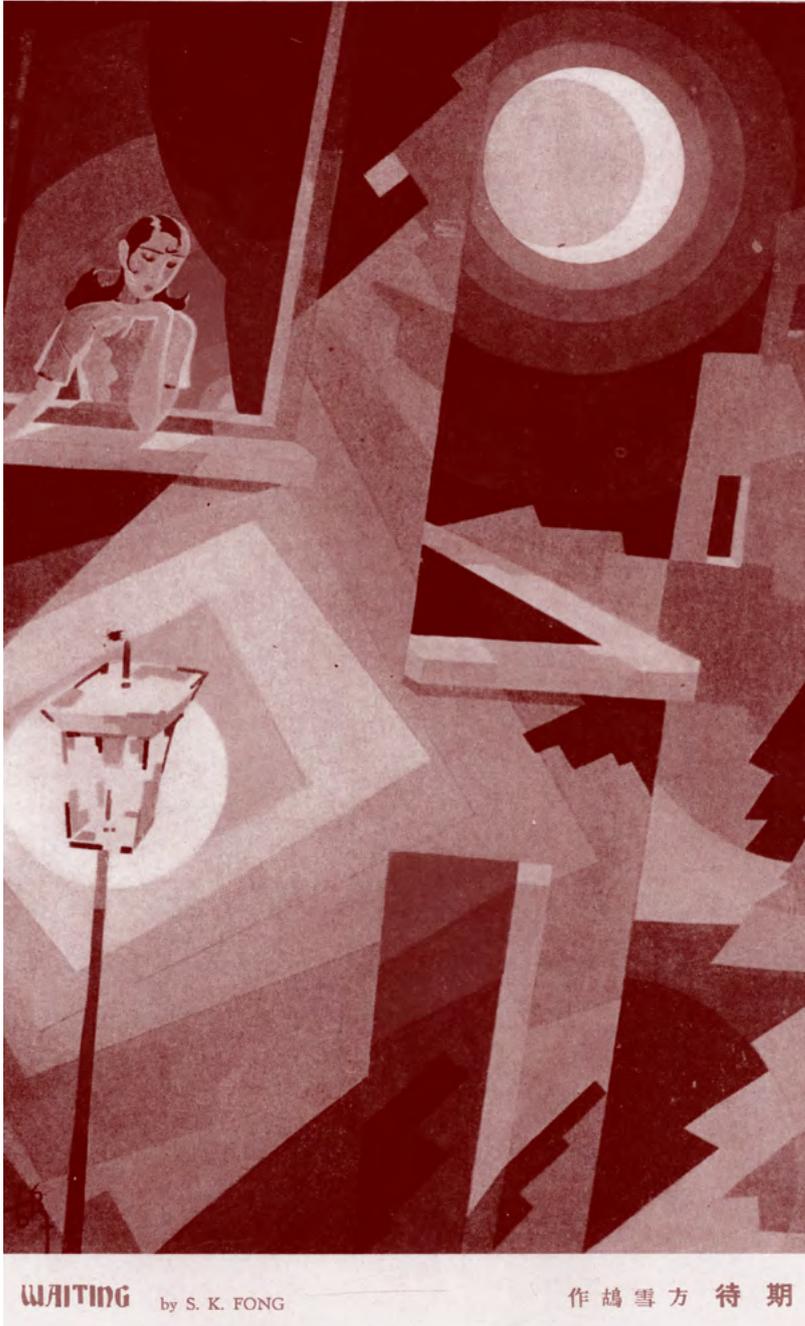
Returning to the institutional constructs of the 1920s and 30s, the fact that these artists were exhibiting their work in public settings, in situations where there were no institutional support or museums to contextualise their practices (the Tianjin Art Museum was probably the first of this kind to present historical work and the work of its contemporaries during its short existence), and due to these conditions artists began to use different strategies to show their work—the ingenuity of which was more innovative than we often recognise today.

Aside from their general reliance on non-art related venues for their exhibitions, one of the most important “exhibition” sites for these artists were printed publications: *The Young Companion*, in circulation from 1926 to 1945, and *Yi Feng Monthly*, published from 1933 to 1937. This platform provided important public exposure for artists, turning the

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pages of the publication into exhibition sites and making these works public—enabling an encounter with larger audiences as a substitute to the museum infrastructure.

The change in politics carried over into debates related to the content of painting, or, perhaps more precisely, its subject matter and larger purpose. However, this discussion within the context of art did not last long; art quickly became a political tool and an important vehicle for the nation's anti-Japanese struggle, which would eventually be clearly articulated in the 1942 Yanan Forum on Literature and Art. There, it was decided that art should depict the life of working class people and serve political movements. In the decades to come this developed into an ideological system of representation that had much in common with Russian Socialist Realism.



*The Young Companion Magazine 66-72*  
Contemporary artists series  
*Waiting* by S.K.Fong

决澜社第三屆畫展



作畫給役·道山  
Highway By Y. T. Yen



作畫風扇·圖樣  
Design By F. C. Lang



作人秋相·童男  
Portrait By C. Y. Young



作多興·張小黃  
Miss Wang By T. Chow



作陶太編·像之友友  
Portrait of a Friend By T. Y. Young



作太興周·機修  
Repair Machinery By C. T. Chow



Portrait By Y. Chung



Still Objects By T. Yu

作編正·物靜

The Young Companion Magazine 107-112, 1933

The Third Exhibition of Storm Society

The Second Exhibition of Chinese Independent Artists Association

# The State, nation building, the museum construct, and the active withdrawal of artists

The museums established by foreigners during the 19th century were greatly affected by the political and social changes as well. RAS Shanghai Museum would become the Sino-Japanese Cultural Centre in 1942, yet still remained open to public. The museum was re-opened in 1945, but due to the vast political changes and flow of foreigners out of China, RAS decided to close its museum and donate library and collection to Peoples Republic of China in May of 1952. Shortly thereafter the Heude Museum also closed.

In the same year, the People's Republic of China established its own museum to strengthen the national identity of the newly built country, according to the following guidelines. In the year before, 1951, the Cultural Bureau announced: "Suggestions on the Policies, Missions, Visions and Future Directions of Local Museums" These "suggestions regarding the museum's policy, task, nature, and development" clearly stated that museums should adopt the model of Russian museums, as their direct referent. This would be again stated clearly in a National Museum Work Meeting of 1956: "The work of our museums should be guided by Marxism-Leninism and other thinking of the Party. For instance, history museums often feature the themes that history is created by the working people, is one that features class struggle, and is driven by the development of productive forces and relations in production. To present these themes in a systematic and politically correct manner, we need to follow the Marxism-Leninism line of thought in doing researches, drafting plans, and presenting the items as well as literature. However, our mastery of these principles has so far proved inadequate. That is why museum workers in China concluded that of the socialist principles of museums, the primary one is to 'follow the guidance of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought'."

The preparatory work for the building of art museums in the main cities around the country was generally the responsibility of

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the Artists' Association (a governmental body established in 1949), and after the opening of each museum it would then become an independent institution, though responsible to the Propaganda Department and Cultural Bureau. This governing structure is still active today. This structure put many institutions in a very difficult position and although they were willing to involve the practices of their contemporaries, even the slightest political changes would directly interrupt institutional programming by way of the Propaganda Bureau.

During the Cultural Revolution, many museums that had taken it upon themselves to preserve historical artifacts suffered greatly during the late 1960s under the campaign: Attack of the Four Olds—old thinking, old culture, old customs, and old habits. The museum staffers struggled to find legitimate revolutionary causes to protect the exhibition of historical artifacts against the destruction of the Red Guards.

One very complicated position over the course of 20th century was occupied by the artist Fan Jiman. What is known of Fan Jiman today is limited to his career as a Communist. By the invitation of Liu Haisu, Fan Jiman began teaching at the Shanghai School of Fine Arts between 1947 and 1949, and later continued teaching at the Shanghai Theatre Academy up through 1955—at which point he was discovered and imprisoned, only to be released from jail in 1975. However, during the early 1950s till 1955, Fan Jiman operated a bookstore called Beethoven Bookstore on Maoming Road, Number 62, near Middle Huaihai Road. The bookstore had huge glass windows facing the busy street, revealing a large room to the curious eyes of the random passerby. Aside from selling different publications in different languages related to art and culture, one could also find art-making materials, taxidermy and different specimens of furniture. Fan Jiman also used the bookstore as a gallery space, hanging his own paintings there for display.<sup>47</sup> According to the painter Yu Youhan: “The room contained everything that artists like.” In this way, Beethoven Bookstore could be understood as an exhibition space that was deeply embedded in the artists' everyday life, where it was not only a bookstore but also a gathering space for peers, leaking out into the public realm.

Xu Chengdou is another example. Born in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), Vietnam, in the 1930s (the specific date remains unknown), Xu Chengdou returned to China in 1959 with a strong urge to contribute to the revival of the country. He would often show artists in Xiamen a set of catalogues that his relatives in Vietnam sent to him. Moreover, through

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his correspondence with his friend Chen Qiyao, who lived in France, he managed to introduce Western modern art to Xiamen, which was one of the major channels for early members of Xiamen Dada to acquaint themselves with Western art.

Today, neither Fan Jiman nor Xu Chengdou's work belong to any official art historical narrative—not even their legacy. Their artistic contributions and ideas concerning the revolutionary nature of art extends far beyond a question of representational imagery, and perhaps more importantly in their pursuit of an understanding of art in relation to a social context. Many of these practices have been hidden from the public, even at the time they were created, but it is interesting to think that we could re-consider these earlier points in history as possible threads connecting with the avant-garde movements that developed around the country in the 1980s.



As another example, Zhao Shou was a founding member of the Chinese Independent Art Association—the group of Chinese students who banded together in Tokyo in 1935. Prior to the formation of the association, the artists together had protested and refused to take part in an exhibition called *Chinese Foreign Students Art Exhibition*, organized by the Supervising Office for Chinese Students Studying Abroad. The group consisted of Liang Xihong, Li Dongping, Zeng Ming, and Zhao Shou, who all protested

Xu Chengdou  
*Still Life*, May 1964  
Image provided by Lin Jiahua

against this official exhibition and in turn organised their own exhibition titled *Ten Chinese Artists in Japan Exhibition*. A year later they established the Chinese Independent Art Association, reflecting the young artists' cosmopolitan tendencies—which were probably also influenced by other groups in Tokyo and their activities there. Yet, at the same time, the designation of being Chinese in the name of the association reflects a complex feeling to still identify with a national identity. Upon returning to China, the group organised a number of exhibitions in Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Nanjing, as well as working to translate foreign texts and thereby introducing a number of art theory texts related to modernism.

Zhao Shou disappeared from the public eye in 1958 until the end of the Cultural Revolution, but still continued his practice while in the countryside, where he underwent his forced “re-education” program. His painting style was radically different from mainstream painting and the expectations of artists of that time. His work re-entered the public debate, slowly, after 1991 when the Guangzhou Art Museum organised his first solo exhibition. Under the influence of the Surrealists, Zhao Shou advocated a strong individual approach. He once stated: “I deny that Surrealism is Western; it was only advocated by the West, but in the world the only trustworthy and reliable source should be yourself.”<sup>5</sup>→



Zhao Shou  
*A man living in a crack*, 1976  
Oil of canvas  
67 × 50 cm

# The post-cultural revolution period and artists' attempts to create a public realm

The early 1980s provided a very different atmosphere for participation in the cultural field, which many artists came to embrace, culminating in the development of the New Wave movement. Although this movement produced a very enthusiastic atmosphere for artistic engagement and contributed greatly in building a sense of a public sphere in the 1980s—across much of the country—it was not a movement that identified under one flag or any one leader. Instead these groups shared certain commonalities, like the artists' drive towards self-organisation, a tendency towards public expression, and experimentation in different art-making strategies and approaches. Their demand for a new understanding of the role of artists and art is especially marked in the exhibition installed on the Democracy Wall in 1979. The Democracy Wall in Xidan, Beijing, was a length of more than ten metres, and became a symbol for freedom of speech. It was a place where people expressed their political views and criticism, which eventually led to inaugural strategies for the temporary occupation of public space, and the first public exhibitions. As such, what had previously been hidden in artists' homes finally made its way out into the public arena.

The exhibition on the Democracy Wall was an attempt by artists to publicly present their work, without any interest in whether the state museums would accept their practices. Viewing the works today, they appear rather impressionistic, without any direct or clear political statement, but it is important to look at their creation and these events in their local contexts, right after the end of the Cultural Revolution. During this time, art and the artist were only intended to be a tool in the full service of ideology—just as with other workers, farmers, and soldiers. It is important to state that most of these artists were amateurs, employed as workers in factories, yet expressing their feelings and emotions through their work, which at that time would have been considered reactionary.

These artists' interventions into the very format of the exhibition structure not only introduced a new approach to art-making, but began a tradition of illegally organised exhibitions as political statements, which not only had its resonance in the art world but also in every aspect

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of the social structure. Aside from the Democracy Wall, there was also the 1979 *Star Exhibition* and the 1989 *Avant-Garde Exhibition* in the National Art Gallery, which could also be described as exhibitions as political actions due to their strong political implications.

This strategy of showing works of art in the street would also be adopted by the Star Group, who held their first exhibition at Beihai Park, next to the National Art Gallery. The members of the Star Group included Huang Rui, Ai Weiwei, Yan Li, Ma Desheng, Mao Lizi, Wang Keping, Bo Yun, Li Shuang, Yang Yiping, Yin Guangzhong, Zhong Acheng, Qu Leilei, and Shao Fei. The group ceased their joint activities in 1983.

After being refused by the National Art Gallery, the mounting of their exhibition in the park next door was clearly intended as a critique of the institution.

The exhibition was simple in format: artists used rope as the structural supports and marked the exhibition area with a simple entrance. At its opening they even charged a small ticket fee, which was later reconsidered due to the great attendance. However, the exhibition was officially proclaimed illegal on September 28, 1979. On the 1st of October, the 30th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, the artists responded by organising a protest march in the name of individual human rights. Starting out from the Xidan Democracy Wall, the demonstrators made their way to the headquarters of the Peking Municipal Party Committee carrying a banner that read: "We Demand Democracy and Artistic Freedom." Finally, from November 23 to December 2, 1979, the *First Stars Exhibition* was held in the Huafang Studio in Beihai Park, Beijing.

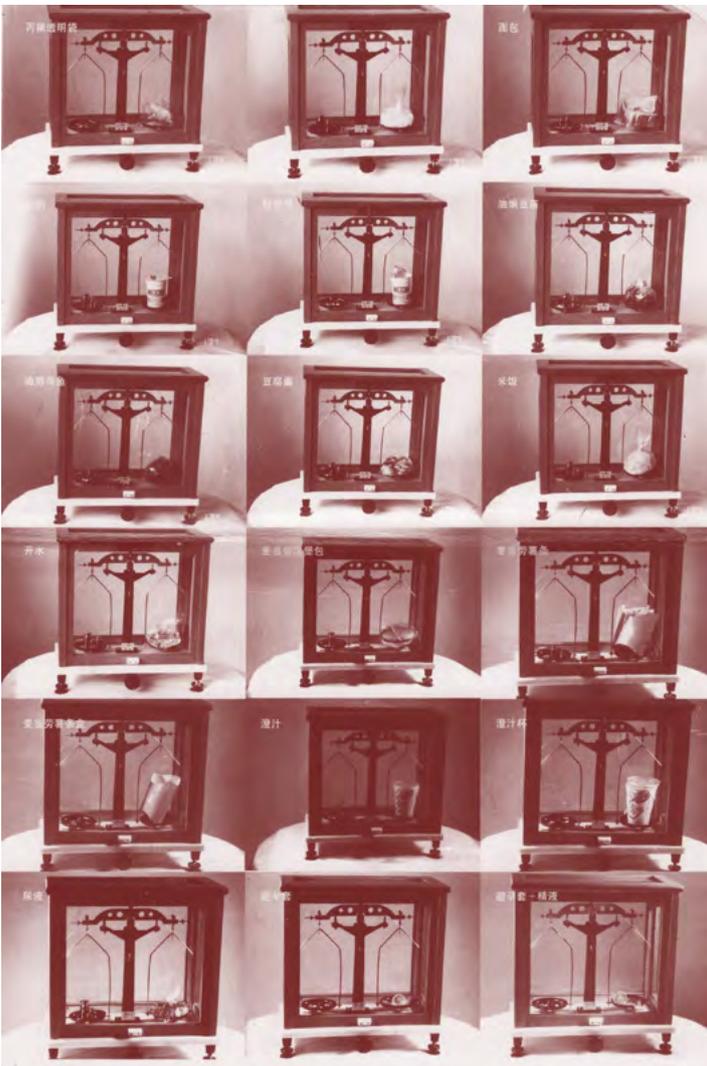
The attempt to reclaim the public sphere through exhibitions and other displays during the early 1980s began to gain momentum after the Democracy Wall exhibitions, and artists started organising exhibitions in different venues, from University Clubs, Cultural Palaces in different districts, private apartments, and even occasionally venturing into the museums.

One of the first museums to present the so-called avant-garde artists was the Shanghai Art Museum. The inaugural exhibition of the museum's new location in 1986 featured a number of artists from the margins, largely thanks to Zhang Jianjun, an artist who worked at the museum, and Fang Zengxian, the open-minded museum director at the time. Another more well-known example is the *1989 Avant-Garde*

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*Exhibition* in the China Art Gallery that was originally supposed to take place in 1987 at the National Agricultural Museum, but was postponed by the Chinese Art Association due to nation-wide campaigns against the “bourgeois liberation”.

However, there is evidence that the conditions for the negotiation of public space in artist-organised exhibitions would change drastically after 1989. At that point, the working environment for artists introduced new ideas around how to organise, and in many cases led to exhibitions being presented not as a physical sites in a specific space, but rather through the exchange of books and magazines as a way of sharing ideas from place to place. This could be seen in a number of exhibitions organised by artist Geng Jianyi, and through proposals by Wang Yousheng. At the same time, in the late 80s and early 90s, international interest in Chinese contemporary art began to grow, and this brought about the increased marketability and salability of art—the preface to a Chinese contemporary art market that hadn’t existed prior to this moment. This has all been achieved under the flag of democratisation, which still today is used as a tool.



Qian Weikang  
*Body Energy Input/ Output of Human Body*, 1994  
performance

# Actions of radical withdrawal

While the export of China-related imagery began to gain momentum, groups of artists in different locales began to move away from ideological representation and simultaneously began challenging the supply-demand relationship in art. The conditions in the early and mid-90s fueled a series of artists' actions and the development of new practices that I here describe as "radical withdrawal." The understanding of this radical withdrawal can be understood on two operating levels: the withdrawal from ideological related imagery through art-making, and withdrawal as a critique of the burgeoning art system and local-global tension, including the growing expectations and misinterpretations that resulted therein.

Shi Yong and Qian Weikang's practice during the early 90s is one of the most representative examples of the time. In 1994, Qian Weikang once wrote in his summer notes, "perhaps I'm too tired to be involved in any ideology fights. I've stepped away from the myth of 'social critique', a black-and-white way of organizing artworks. I'm not measuring with 'God's eyes'; measuring is not a result of personal experience. Instead, it's our common experience. An artist is nothing more than an observer, someone who works in a specialized field. An artist is just like a physicist; all he needs to do is to disturb the scene when there is a need."<sup>6</sup>→

Both of the artists began using very sensitive, ephemeral materials, creating some of the earliest installations during the early 1990s. Qian Weikang created a body of work using chalk powder and a system for measurement, while Shi Yong used photo-sensitive material in his installations, producing very slight divisions between the light source and the photo-sensitive materials through which he explored the very fragility of their relationship and interaction. The notion of measuring and exploring very precisely calculated conditions was also investigated by Qian Weikang in the work he performed in his apartment in 1994 titled, 人体身物能量输入/输出物理实验 (*Body Energy Input/ Output of Human Body*) in which he calculated the precise amount of food he would consume in one day and measure the precise amount of excretion it created.

The experiments of these two artists would eventually take very divergent paths after 1996, when Qian Weikang made a more radical break from the art world, while Shi Yong's practice took another path.

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Another example from this same period is the work of a group that organised under the name 解析 (Measurement Group) in 1988, but would later change their name to 新刻度 (New Analyst Group). Although the collective included many members at its inception, due to the very rigorous guidelines dictating the creative process, only three members continued to work together in the end: Gu Dexin, Chen Shaoping, and Wang Luyan. Their basic guidelines were:

- No paint;
- No application of the paint brush allowed;
- Only tools allowed are pencils and rulers;
- The work must adhere to the small size of an A4 sheet of paper (as a result of the artists' observation that large works are about visual experience while small-scale work invites a reading of the piece);
- And the most important thing is to abolish any artistic personality.<sup>7→</sup>

During their years of activity, the artists worked on developing a number of very clear parameters in order to abolish each other's personality as present in the works. In one of the first experiments, called 解析— (Analysis), they took away their individual names and identified themselves as A1, A2, and A3, claiming beforehand that A1, A2 and A3 were not the same, but after developing the rules they then claimed that A1=A2=A3 (with each member represented by a color in the process: A1-black, A2-yellow, A3-red). They would all start from one point on a sheet of paper with the instruction to create a 4.5 cm line and a 45 degree angle, one by one. When the line breaks the plane of the paper, then the work is considered finished. Each movement was clearly documented in the forms that became a very important reference point in their work.

The first series of Analyst works were exhibited in Wang Luyan's apartment, a small room that was also the New Analyst Group's working studio. The works were hung on the wall and it was a semi-public event in which the three of them invited only critics and curators, as they were not confident that the broader public would understand the work. After the first exhibition, the members realised that their work needed to exist in a different format other than on the walls of an exhibition space or gallery, and this led them to present their work in the book format—since their practice required reading rather than a reliance on a purely visual experience, which was a major challenge for them. Exhibiting their work

in the form of a book also required an abolishment of the original as the final form for presentation within the art system.

They finally abandoned the gallery presentation altogether and included their work in museum bookshops alongside all the other books, thereby adopting a new context for their work. In this way, the New Analyst Group initiated a very important transformation of what was understood as an exhibition in China, which during the 90s was a critical exploration that connected the activities of many different groups around the country, and specifically not through the physical space of a museum or gallery, but by utilising the space of the book page and publication spread as an exhibition space and place for the sharing of different activities.

In many ways the working methodology of the New Analyst Group is closely connected with artist Gu Dexin's withdrawal in 2009 from active involvement in the art system, which is probably the latest example among artists to pursue this strategy. Gu Dexin officially withdrew from the art world with the exhibition titled *2009.05.02*, a straightforward display of panels in red with the following words: "We have killed people we have killed men we have killed women we have killed old people we have killed children we have eaten people we have eaten hearts we have eaten brains we have hit people we have punched their eyes out we have smashed in their faces..."<sup>8</sup>

These radical attempts of withdrawal for many were caused by their disappointment with the system and the future it was/is heading in, but also as a natural outcome of working together in more collaborative modes or the seemingly simple desire to approach art as life.

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### The art museum as an example of the art system

The interaction between artists and the museum complex which began in the 1980s still did not instigate the change of these art institutions into research or study halls, but rather sporadic artistic interventions would take over the institutional venue to produce an exhibition and thereby turn the exhibition into the site of production rather than the institution itself, due to its specific temporal nature.

Xiamen Dada, in the events they organised beginning in 1986, reflected on the abovementioned symbolic values. In December of 1986, the group organised an exhibition at the Fujian Art Museum titled *To Happen in Fujian Art Museum Event Exhibition*, and as one can see in the title itself there is a nod to the temporality of the exhibition, which the artists anticipated and highlighted. For this exhibition they didn't show the works that they had initially planned; instead, they brought in construction materials they had found around the museum building and exhibited this detritus. After the exhibition, Xiamen Dada stated: "This is a delimited, aggressive, and continuous event... The fact that these objects are flooding the [Fujian] art museum clearly shows that it's an action of attack. And what is being attacked here is not the audience, but their opinions on "art." Likewise, it is not the art museum itself that is under attack, but the art museum as an example of the art system..."<sup>9</sup> This is one of the earliest and most direct statements on art and the process of its institutionalisation.

Today, Zhang Jian's dream of having a museum in every province around the country—perhaps, even more than one—has finally come true.

On an international level, still today there aren't any local art institutions that take on an active role in the development of a discourse that extends beyond the country's borders. In most cases such attempts actually feed local markets and its particular set of relationships. Very few institutions, like the Guangzhou Times Museum, for example, adopt a role of active withdrawal from the mainstream of contemporary art to provide a different voice through programming and other initiatives.

In fact, the notion of withdrawal is an embedded part of the greater Chinese literati tradition. The seeking out of retreat, a place to stay away from public affairs, and a place for contemplation is a common theme in the writing of and about the literati.

The notion of withdrawal as a way of staying out of the mainstream; the notion of withdrawal as a place at the margins, which affords some sense of autonomy; the notion of withdrawal as also one who is an active observer, with fluid connections that he/she can easily reactivate; the notion of withdrawal as a much needed break, as a form of self-cultivation; all of these practices of withdrawal, as I said before, are rare, however their fragility and lack of visibility often allow the mainstream to filter them out and ignore them according to the new consumer logic.

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This understanding of active withdrawal as a strategy for rethinking the different sets of relationships that have become constricted in the current art system also will hopefully lead to a re-imagining of the artistic encounter, rather than the continued following of a routine-guided operation—itself a reflection of the powerlessness of our imagination.

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The full version of this text was published in Chinese in *Active Withdrawals-Life and Death of Institutional Critique* (無為而為: 機制批判的生與死), publishers: Shanghai Scientific and Technological Literature Press | 上海科技文獻出版社 (Shanghai – China), 2014

# Notes:

1. Lisa Claypool, "Zhang Jian and China's First Museum", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Aug. 2005; 64, 2. ←
2. *The North China Daily News Sunday*, May 21st, 1939, page 16. ←
3. Ralph Croizier, "Post-Impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai: The Juelanshe (Storm Society) and the Fate of Modernism in Republican China,"↳ in John Clark (ed.), *Modernity in Asian Art*, University of Sydney East Asian Series, Sydney: Wild Peony, 1993, pp. 135-54. ←
4. All information gained from interview with Fan Elun June 2014. ←
5. Ju Sou (Zhao Shou), *Surrealist across century*, Guang Dong Art Museum, 2008. ←
6. From Qian Weikang's archive. ←
7. From the interview with Wang Luyan conducted by Biljana Ciric in Beijing, 2013. ←
8. Exhibition booklet, Gallery Continua, Beijing, 2009. ←
9. *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective* (in Chinese), Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 上海人民出版社 (Shanghai – China) 2005, page 13. ←

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# A Signal and a Perturbation: Co-localities, Language and Facility

Simon Soon

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Let me begin with a caveat, a story about the possibility of a sincere but ultimately problematic sentiment of collaboration. The story is all the more pertinent because of the current renewed interest by a number of East Asian institutions in mapping what they have expediently categorized as “contemporary Southeast Asian art.” Take, for example, the establishment of the Asian Cultural Complex in Gwangju, positioned as the “hub city of Asian culture,” or the Mori Art Museum’s interest in producing a Southeast Asian survey exhibition.

Very often these extensions of “friendship” are welcome: at times they have productively addressed specific infrastructural dysfunctions and absences across Southeast Asia, thereby enabling a regional network and camaraderie among a generation of curators that continues to this day.<sup>1</sup> At other times, they tend to feed the exhibition-making frenzy, inflicting another round of “mapping” violence across a convenient cluster of countries that fall within the category of “Southeast Asia,” masking the spectacular engine of capital with the facile rubric of political or contextual reading of contemporary art and culture.

I reflect on these matters by way of a video artwork from 1999 by artist and curator Niranjan Rajah, and will use it as a parable of the folly and foible of friendship. In *How to Explain Malaysian Art to a Gwangju Commissioner while Slowly Getting Drunk*, a single-channel video work comprises of documented footage showing a meeting between Niranjan, who was selected as a local interlocutor, and a parachuted-in curator from the Gwangju Biennale.<sup>2</sup> The latter was visiting Kuala Lumpur to undertake research for the next edition of the biennale.



Still from *How to Explain Malaysian Art to a Gwangju commissioner while slowly getting drunk*, single channel video, Niranjan Rajah, 1999. All rights reserved.

Upon viewing, Nirranjan's video is fairly straightforward and self-explanatory. The footage discloses the background negotiations typical of the curatorial scenario in the late 1990s, with regional commissioners from powerful centers such as Fukuoka, Gwangju and Brisbane working with local curators supposedly acting as cultural mediators. The research methodology involved in the production of large-scale exhibitions of contemporary art for a biennale format can be said to have remained relatively unchanged since then. In the video, Nirranjan gives a brief overview of the national art scene while being plied with free beer. He gets carried away by the story he is telling. Increasingly, his speech begins to slur as he becomes more and more inebriated.

With cheesy hotel muzak playing in the background, Nirranjan can be seen attempting to establish Internet art (or what he calls E-Art, or Electronic Art) as constituting a significant trajectory artists in Malaysia were already exploring back in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> A major survey of Electronic Art was held at the National Art Gallery in 1997, for example, that included works already engaged with the Internet. But we know in hindsight that his suggestions were subsequently ignored: the biennale exhibition of 2000, titled *Man and Space*, showcased instead the usual suspects of Asian contemporary art presenting works in large-scale installations—the kind of spectacle we have come to associate with biennales today.<sup>4</sup>

The video documentation, in which footage captured by the Gwangju commissioner is intervened upon by Nirranjan, makes two claims. The first is the pretense of friendship within the context of a fact-finding mission. The second is a subterfuge, introduced by Nirranjan, to highlight the economies of exchange and structures of power that undergird a number of these institutionalizing networks, and a selection process prejudiced against anti-spectacular forms of art that do not fit the biennale mold. The artwork does not entirely dismiss the possibility of genuine institutional collaboration, but acts as an admonition, a reminder of the perils of collaboration. It is a form of institutional criticism in the age of the biennale.<sup>5</sup> One could also extend it to a critique of the spectacular, the very *modus operandi* that reinforces the logic of display and consumption within large-scale exhibitions. Furthermore, it reveals the kind of facile engagement and dismal quality of research that is farmed out to local intermediaries—as well as the ability to introduce sustained and innovative methods of inquiry into exhibitions of such a nature.

Speaking of an “age of the biennale,” perhaps the field needs to be further illustrated with another work of art. In his performance lec-

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ture *Sun, Sweat and Solar Queens* presented at the recent Kochi-Muziris Biennale,<sup>6</sup> artist/curator/critic Ho Rui An uses the phantasmatic image of English tutor Anna Leonowens from the musical *The King and I* as a stand-in for the persona he calls the Solar Queen.<sup>7</sup> The Solar Queen, as presented by Rui An, traces her roots to the broader colonial enterprise, sustained in part as a metaphor for the illumination that came out of European Enlightenment. For Rui An, the Solar Queen is a maternal embodiment of what he calls the “global domestic,” a notion that operates on a pretense of cosmopolitanism while privileging certain modes of address, discourse, body, economy, and perhaps even art.



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Her song is a song about globalization. About a world where there are no strangers. A world of perfect communicability. A world of endless exchange. A world whose main currency takes shape from all the new and beautiful things I learn about you, day after day.

Observe, for example, this image of native children forming a ring around the Thai dancer in mimicry of Anna’s skirt. By extension, Ho speaks of the global domestic as an afterlife of colonial legacy. Pushing the argument further, I suggest that this notion of the global domestic might also be embedded within the curatorial process, a process through which a sense of the world is imagined. Within this rhetoric, the terms, even if they are local, are often articulated within a very narrowly agreed convention of global vernacular, just like how the concept of friendship, or intimacy, is played along Anna’s terms, even as the native dancer is brought into this moment of contact. The young child is taught to shake

Still from *The King and I*, directed by Walter Lang, 1956.  
All rights reserved.

hands rather than “kowitz,” and to mimic the dance moves because his customary dance is now deemed “traditional” rather than “modern.”

We see parallels with certain curatorial processes, premised on collaboration and consultation, that work in this manner. Artists identified and plucked out of their environment are made ambassadors and play the role of intermediaries, then inducting their fellow compatriots into this global discourse of trans-national and trans-regional ecumene. By this I mean a terrain of customs whose rules and conventions are already charted and often undertaken ritualistically, without a critical assessment of the underlying politics governing their smooth operation. This ranges from the legibility of the artworks—needing to address specific “urgencies”—to social ceremonies such as those moments of bonding over alcohol.

Ho’s critique traces this phenomenon to a history of colonialism and, by extension, to Euro-American-centric dictates on the terms of the global. However, as I have suggested by referring to *How to Explain Malaysian Art to a Gwangju Commissioner while Slowly Getting Drunk*, the privilege is no longer necessarily and exclusively Euro-American. Any economy having mastered the glib tongue of collaboration might easily replicate this model of friendship.

We speak of this space as democratic, laissez-faire, free-wheeling and meritocratic. It bypasses the stultifying “inopportunities” and national bureaucracies that often result in wider local disinterest and lack of support for the contemporary avant-garde. But at the same time, the aspiration of the “global domestic” is equally exclusionary, on many levels—here the dictates are set by collectors, curators and historians trained in specific university educations, possessing specific charismatic prowess, and drawn to a specific homogenous taste and concept of what makes contemporary art contemporary. What about those who are left out of the conversation by this invisible and unspoken hierarchy?

This is how I have come to the contemporary, not as a space of ecumene, but as a place (as intimated in Henri Lefèbvre’s reading of social spaces) of stakes and rifts, gaps and specters that culminate in a sense of the multitude that cannot be contained by a discourse on a commonplace understanding of the “global” as we have come so conveniently to speak of as one sense of the world and worldliness.<sup>8></sup>

Instead, I favor the argument put forward by art historian Patrick Flores. Instead of thinking of the local as an articulation of the global, Flores advances the notion of the global as a make-up of co-

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localities.<sup>9→</sup> This entails the recognition also of spaces and approaches that are not necessarily hybrid—for when we speak of hybridity, we often favor sites and modes of production that still privilege centers as crossroads of traffic producing a cultural *mélange*. In contrast, the notion of co-localities suggests that different geographies become equal coparticipants in what we understand to be “global,” not just subjects of a certain hegemonic norm that translates into uniformed modes of address, methods of production, or paths of circulation.

At the same time, the notion of the local is not necessarily reactionary. Rather, as a dialectical foil it is also perennially aware of the dangers of parochialism, associated with being solely rooted in one place and closing oneself off from the goings-on of the world. In this light, the calculation one makes in finding an extension of the local into a sense of the world through mimesis and mastery is a moot point.

A turn of the tables renegotiates the terms inherent in the activity of writing and speaking into those where the extensivity of the local as a topos of agency crystallizes into purchase and active contemplation. By way of a conclusion, a look at another work might prompt us to consider what is at stake here. In 1974, Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa staged what they called a “jointly-initiated experience.” The collaborative project involved a display of found objects that included discarded raincoats collected at a specific time, burnt mosquito coils from a particular evening, an empty bird cage with a label that recorded the time when the bird was released, and many other found objects, paired with eventual statements included in the labels accompanying the artworks.<sup>10→</sup>



Exhibition view from *Towards a Mystical Reality*, organized by Sulaiman Esa and Redza Piyadasa, Kuala Lumpur, 1974. All rights reserved.

The title of the exhibition, *Towards A Mystical Reality*, is instructive. It enjoins the spectator to consider an expanded vocabulary of the real, which emerged by the mid-19th century as a currency of the modern, in terms that are paradigmatically altered. This inflection of the real with the mystical then points to a desire to breach the concrete towards a vector of knowing that takes on a spiritual dimension. The exhibition comprises a litany of the everyday, detritus of contemporary society and culture shored by an exhibitionary frame to depict the local. Yet the shift towards the mystical is also a reorientation of one's sense of time and place.

The exhibition marks the moment when the local is no longer parochial or untouched. In this sense, the currency generates a point of contact. Even so, the demonstration of an intensive and extensive investment in the local demonstrates a desire to constitute and prospect a knowledge system that is paradigmatically altered. The dialectic swing towards the "mystical" as a qualifier of the "real" undoes the cartographic rationalism that underpins the Enlightenment project, offering a different term of Enlightenment. In this sense, what the exhibition seeks is a path towards an alterity, an epistemological rupture.

Here I return to a closing reflection offered by a participant on the last day of a seminar I attended called *Collecting Matters*.<sup>11</sup>→ The participant admonished that, in spite of our differences, a language that is in hindsight largely homogenous facilitates the way we speak at the seminar. After all, most of us understood what each other was saying. This was, according to the participant, troubling, not least because it revealed a trend towards universalism in discourse and pointed to a possible danger on the horizon—perhaps we may never find a different aesthetic language to talk about contemporary art.

Thinking about this further, I propose a different view. Perhaps it is not that we are speaking the same language. This would simply imply that the world over is uncritically replicating a ready-to-use language that issues forth from specific institutional domains. Could we also not consider that I, coming from a different part of the world, consciously choose to master this language. In choosing to write and engage in this manner, perhaps I gain the facility to speak another's tongue, and this mimesis constitutes a form of challenge to an existing hegemonic discourse—by highlighting the fissures, awkwardness, and slippages in my possible misuse of the standard discourse for my own gain.

Ultimately, privileging the place one gazes from is to recognize the local as more than a passive geographical vessel, inert and

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only too keen to adopt without adaptation. Instead, adaptation could be a demonstration of empathy for a different ground of imagination—committed to one’s own place within the world, yet not entirely withdrawn from the larger conversation around the world. At the same time, it asserts a kind of pressure on the terms and facilities of the global; that perhaps there are areas of knowledge that the universalism of the modern and the hegemony of the neo-liberal capital are not yet able to assimilate. These spaces still exist, but they require more than air miles, carbon footprints, or local intermediaries to map them out. Think of it as a signal, that tremor of perturbation with the potential to set off an epistemic shift in the kinds of knowledge we are able to produce.

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# Notes:

1. The curatorial workshops organized by the Japan Foundation over the years have nurtured several generations of curatorial peers whose network and friendships continue to shape curatorial knowledge about contemporary art across the region. ←
2. See *Relocations: Electronic Art of Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah*, Kuala Lumpur: 12 Art Space and MGTf, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2008. ←
3. Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah, *E-Art ASEAN Online*, Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 2000. ←
4. *Gwangju Biennale 2000: Man + Space*, Kwangju: Kwang Biennale Press, 2000. ←
5. John Clark, "Histories of the Asian 'New': Biennales and Contemporary Asian Art," *Asian Art History in the 21st Century*, Vishkha N. Desai, ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, pp. 229-49. ←
6. Video of performance lecture courtesy of Ho Rui An. ←
7. *The King and I* is a 1951 Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway musical based on a novel by Margaret Landon. The novel fictionalizes the encounter and relationship between Anna Leonowens, an English tutor hired into the Siamese court, and King Mongkut. ←
8. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992. ←
9. Sylvia Tsai, "Salvage Operation," *Art Asia Pacific*, Issue 93, May/June, 2015. Flores notes, "I'm trying to get away from the local-global dichotomy, which doesn't hold, and to insist on an extensive locality or even an equivalent locality. It's not like 'you guys are the global and we are just a local articulation of the global.' No, we co-produce the global through our locality." ←
10. See Simon Soon, "An Empty Canvas on which Many Shadows Have Fallen", *Narratives in Malaysian Art, Vol. 2*, Kuala Lumpur: RogueArt, 2013, pp. 55-69. ←
11. *Collecting Matters #3: The Place from Where We Look*, Kadist Art Foundation, Paris, France, 24 – 27 June 2015. ←

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# *Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine*

Otobong Nkanga

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Otobong Nkanga's contribution to *Qalqalah* is a series of eight circular images that are excerpts from the wall drawing *Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine* (2015). This drawing stretched through Kadist Paris' space as part of an exhibition with the same title. As the wall drawing only existed for the duration of the show, the inclusion of these images in *Qalqalah* allows them to be examined anew.

The images are cut-outs taken from photographs that Nkanga sourced at the National Archives of Namibia in Windhoek. Ahead of the exhibition in Paris, Nkanga conducted a field-trip across Namibia, tracing the route of the Otavi railway, a train line built when the country was under colonial control and known as German South-West Africa. Beginning at Swakopmund on the west coast, she travelled almost 600km inland, arriving at the town of Tsumeb. Nkanga had first read about Tsumeb when researching the copper-rich mineral malachite. For the collectors of minerals and crystals Tsumeb enjoys legendary status, as the quality and sheer diversity of minerals from the Tsumeb mine are almost unparalleled.

However, this series of images does not display stunning Tsumeb specimens of minerals like azurite, malachite or tsumebite. Equally it does not show what today remains of the former mine – an exhausted, fenced-off hole in the earth. Nor does it depict the roofs of churches in European cities clad with copper from Tsumeb. Instead, what is shown are working bodies. What is shown is labour. These are images dating from 1900 to 1980. Yet, what interests Nkanga is not building a chronology, but lending visibility to the labour behind the extraction and processing of resources.

These images make visible: swarms of workers dwarfed by the mine's towering winch; miners in hard hats, shin-pads and knee-pads waiting to descend the mine's shaft; Ovambo labourers in the 1950s shovelling and wheelbarrowing coke, or maybe ore; workers in the early twentieth century, some barefoot, all wearing hats, awaiting their food rations; a defiant black fist raised before a sea of other resistant fists at a meeting of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in November 1977; and a worker walking alongside hefty slabs of unrefined blister copper – weighing around 180kg each – ready to be transported by rail to Walvis bay and loaded onto ships bound for Europe.

If *Qalqalah* asks what it might mean to understand the global as a “multitude of localities”, Nkanga adds a further nuance, asking if the local could be understood as a complex multitude of visibilities and invisibilities.

Clare Molloy

All images are courtesy of Otobong Nkanga and the National Archives of Namibia.



Ovambo labourers at Tsumeb copper mine shovelling ore or coke  
Photographer unknown, 1953



Ovambo labourers at Tsumeb copper mine  
Photographer unknown, 1953



Blister copper produced at Tsumeb mine ready for railage  
to Walvis Bay, each slab weighs 400lbs (180kg)  
Photographer unknown, 1964



Black and European mine workers waiting to go down  
the De Wet shaft, Tsumeb  
Photographer Alice Mertens, c.1970s - 1980s



Tsumeb mine  
Photographer unknown, 1908



Mine workers in Tsumeb awaiting their rations  
Photographer unknown, c.1900



Mass meeting of SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation)  
in Tsumeb, November 11, 1977  
Photographer unknown, 1977



TCL (Tsumeb Corporation Limited) mine workers, Tsumeb  
Photographer unknown, c.1970 - 1980s

# Ana Gallardo's *Sicaria*

Victoria Noorthoorn

**VII-**

*Maneco Uriarte did not kill Duncan; it was the weapons, not the men, that fought. They had lain sleeping, side by side, in a cabinet, until hands awoke them. Perhaps they stirred when they awoke; perhaps that was why Uriarte's hand shook, and Duncan's as well. The two knew how to fight—the knives, I mean, not the men, who were merely their instruments—and they fought well that night. They had sought each other for a long time, down the long roads of the province, and at last they had found each other; by that time their gauchos were dust. In the blades of those knives there slept, and lurked, a human grudge.*

*Brodie's Report*  
Jorge Luis Borges (Trans. Andrew Hurley)

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In Jorge Luis Borges's story *The Encounter* the narrator relates the first revelation of a secret he has kept since he was nine or ten: his eye-witness account of a knife duel between two men or, more precisely, between a sword and a dagger. Borges masterfully drives the point home at the end of his tale: the real antagonists of the duel were the weapons, loaded as they were with history and anger, and the men wielding them were mere instruments playing out a story that they themselves needed to write.

It was my husband, the Argentinian writer Carlos Gamerro, who pointed out this story to me when I asked him about the presence of the gun in Ana Gallardo's monumental charcoal of 2012: *Hitwoman (Sicaria)*. In the very foreground the circular lens of a dark iron gun is pointed directly at the spectator's gaze. Further back it is gripped by an abstract hand, decision taken. And, in the very background, the blurred shape of a figure, focused on the act of gripping the weapon and cocking it, holds her impassive gaze. Last, blank space—the void of silence.

The drawing orchestrates conflict on several levels: between reality and art; between the figure portrayed and the spectator watching her; and, in a classical construction of the image, between the figure (the weapon) and the background (the potential killer, whom the drawing manages to keep anonymous).

The precision in the work's construction destabilizes its artistic nature. It feels as if artifice has been set aside, as if Gallardo's charcoal had scorched even the aphorisms of Wilde. Reality here does not imitate art. Art disintegrates in its hyperreality, which engulfs it. We are not dealing with a work of art but with a judgment of all humankind concentrated in the lens of this weapon. We live *inside* the violence created by Man himself: colonialism in Latin America and Africa; the Conquest of the Desert in Argentina in 1880, which made ghosts of its native peoples; the depravity that triggered history's genocides; the absurd terrorism of ISIL. It is a far cry from the subtle or virtuoso expressions of the great artists or writers of history. And I venture to use such grandiose language because the way the image itself is constructed gives form to a generic human killer that could be the image of each and every one of us, the spectators.

The drawing points at the spectator in order to eliminate them as such. We are no longer an arthouse audience; we are the target of a weapon pointing at us. The spectator in this work becomes a witness of their own self-destruction as both spectator (because art—an irrelevance—has fled from the scene) and subject (on the brink of being eliminated).

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But the drawing shrouds the killer in anonymity. It presents but does not betray her identity. It constructs a coldly generic authorship. Behind this, obviously, is the artist, assuming this generic authorship, merging the author of the drawing and the author of the killing in one big question mark.

The drawing raises the following questions: Who is doing the killing? Is it the generic hitman? A particular hitwoman who wishes to remain anonymous? Or the artist considered generically? If so, why equate artist and killer? Who exactly are artists—or art itself—killing?

The drawing insists on the question of authorship—a far from frivolous question in the global context of an overblown marketing of art that turns contemporary art into fashion and gives rise to (absurd) prices increasingly decided by a “star system” of authors (artists and curators) and by values alien to the creation of art (if indeed we are talking about art and not about visual products). The questioning of authorship—who is the killer in this work (who is the author of the crime depicted) and who is the killer of this work (who is constructing this work with these questions, and why)—is crucial in Gallardo’s work.

Gallardo uses personal and social life stories to probe the conditions of marginalization within contemporary Latin America. She has, on many occasions, chosen to collaborate with others, inviting them to work on projects that are in the end as much the work of the guest subject as of the artist. In the process, individual authorships are dissolved to make way for works that, while telling individual stories, act almost invariably as metaphors, alarms, for major social problems.

Gallardo is particularly interested in old age. By focusing on the passage of time, she also probes the conditions in which the great crossings-over occur: birth (hence, abortion); marriage (hence, the stories surrounding it); and fundamentally death (as an end point reached with dignity). The artist’s investigations have led her to work in the farthest-flung parts of the world, with hundreds of different people: isolated older women; women in prisons; prostitutes; women in indigenous communities; urban women in big cities; men at the end of their lives with all the fragility of their feelings.

On one of her research trips around 2012 Gallardo committed to working in Xochiquetzal, a Mexican nursing home for old prostitutes who had been living on the street. She won a scholarship in order to work more closely on their life stories. But, on her arrival, the governor forced her into a trade-off: Gallardo could carry through her project

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in exchange for seventy hours' social work: specifically her job would involve caring for Estela, a terminally ill patient, totally bedridden after several embolisms. Gallardo: "At first I was scared and didn't feel up to it, but eventually I accepted. I took care of Estela for a time, until finally she died. I never did get to finish my project. I wasn't allowed to work on it until I'd put in my hours of social service, which I never managed to because Estela died." Her passing took over an artist whose great theme is death itself, preventing her, ironically enough, from carrying out her work on death. So Gallardo took up a knife—a dagger—and in the heat of the anger and frustration at her powerlessness to act (either her project or to save Estela), she carved out a text on the wall next to the one where she hung the drawing *Hitwoman*:

*...the governor did not greet me when I got there, I waited for her for many days, the bitch... she took me to the room of the old woman who was there, lying on a pile of old mattresses wet with her own piss which had been leaking from the nappies she'd been wearing for days, the floor tacky with all the shit, she lay there still in her filth, I couldn't do anything on my own, only weep, I wept all day long, I wept and wept and wept, full of rage, she couldn't move on her own, she did nothing on her own, I have to feed her but the food runs out through the gaps between the teeth in her mouth, I nearly throw up, fucking hell, the bitch, how could she do this to me, I'm not fit to care for this woman, I can't, I throw up three times and collapse in the street, I'm scared, but I come back and it's always full of flies breeding in her shit, I wash her hair, I stroke her hands.*

Estela passed away. Shortly after that Gallardo picked up the knife to carve this text on the wall and picked up the charcoal to bear witness to her anger in her drawing, which she entitled *Hitwoman*. It is very possible that, as in Borges's story, Gallardo's knife and charcoal needed to have their say and thereby completely deface the idea of the artist as creator. As in the story, knife and charcoal fight their duel, do what they have to, while the artist is a mere instrument in their service. By depicting an anonymous killer, knife and charcoal—in complicity with Gallardo—are determined to kill art, kill the artist and kill the art system.

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Ana Gallardo  
*Sicaria (Hitwoman)*, 2012  
Charcoal on paper  
257 × 272 cm  
All rights reserved.

# Qalqalah: Thinking about History

Sarah Rifky

**VIII-**

Sleeping and waking present a philosophical conundrum: what happens to the repositories of language and memory in the transition between these two states? One must remember that anything that negotiated two states in the era of nations was hugely political. Things are different now. Everyday, Qalqalah gets up to face the rest of her life, a life post-narrative. In her recollection of stories, she never takes language for granted. Today, as she wakes up, she tries to understand the paradigm of “monolingual activism” of a group of people she had met outside of a convention seeking to invent a new polity with the help of linguists and financiers. She rightfully reasons that at the heart of any monolingual impulse is a questioning of the hegemony of imperial language. She pauses to rethink her thought in a language outside of English. It is a repetitive thought. She pauses again to rethink her thoughts in a language external to French. The pauses continue until she has rethought her thoughts in the spectrum of languages known to her. The feeling associated with each thought was distinct from the other thoughts, even though it was a gloss of the same thought. One might think it odd that the same thought feels different across languages. This whole mulling over language takes time. Words gather en masse yet they don’t tell a story; they just sit there in a pile in her mind... As the day went on, she thought to herself that there were certainly merits to reviving languages that were almost dead, and to exploring each language for its own sake. This would incite a renewal of philosophy for the service of the future, a philosophy that was often lost in the battles of many languages on one tongue. The truths that populated Qalqalah’s mind that day had all been spoken on the tongues of ancient linguists, but none lived long enough to give account.

It is worth noting that in the era of the nation state, people spoke many languages. In the age of the Conglomerate Corporation the nature of competition had changed. If the CC was committed to incubating philosophy in its universality, it was holding poetry at bay. Poetry is the only possible means of vocalizing another future. Poetry in its particularity is not complicit, for it simply does not translate. Metonymy in rhyme, broken language, and syntax re-ordered. Its content is encrypted in form and that in itself, is unique.

While she was attending a gathering of monolinguals, within the chaos of activists, a voice interrupted the noise. In a crisp sounding English, a former British Islander addressed the crowd and no one in particular: “Do you speak French?” a bilingual translator immediately rose to the voice and echoed the question further “Qui parle Francais?” Several

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heads turned to the translated voice. Silence enveloped the gathering for a moment, as the monolinguals shifted uncomfortably. Heads that didn't turn had understood also. They may not speak French, yet understanding is always imminent. Does the unintentional act of understanding make one complicit with the bilinguals? Some languages lurk in other languages; it is hard to separate them entirely. The true essence of monolingualism is historically impossible—any claim to this position (of monolingualism that is) is always broken. Qalqalah sighs to herself as she imagines a shuttle lost in space between languages. What had this voluntary translation done? Was it even accurate? In another instant or language, how does this anecdote translate from the English into French?

If present, one would feel interpellated. Somehow, we are all complicit in this future. Even I, myself, as the author-as-narrator become unnecessarily involved in this affair. I descend into the realm of the story, which is an uncomfortable place to be. Fear of losing one's language compels the monolingual activist to refuse to speak to another. At the same time, conquest is only possible through speaking another's language, is it not? Qalqalah would often fantasize about Napoleon's accents, musing over them as inflections of history, of ideology. It is said, that he had never mastered English. As a woman, it made little sense to Qalqalah to imagine a salvation from automated economy entirely through a monolingual stance, even if this language was approached in love, in the manner of Ibn al Arabi's teachings. In love with Arabic, she had become Arabic. They had become one. Qalqalah's entire premise of being is predicated upon language; language beyond rhetoric and poetry, rhythm and letter, implicit, coded, hidden, that which is beyond the lexical, beyond words. To recite verses of Ibn Arabi's poems here in translation would betray the text. Qalqalah, like her own memory of history, is a contradiction. Here we stand as readers outside the text in foreboding weather, Qalqalah's breath heaving to the rhythm of the incoherent claims of a monolingual state, young unstable speaking subjects, and jealous languages fighting on people's tongues, smashing against their dentals. She puckered her lips into the shape of an O and her breath turned to smoke. Qalqalah exhaled the ghost of labial wars and revolutions in language into the cold air. Even this long sought after future had been co-opted, she thought. She studied the odd crowd of willful youth, each with the claim to a language that ultimately was not their own, yet was not foreign to them, and resigned herself from them. She imagined her right hand a *sibḥa* and proceeded to re-count the names of all books.

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If in the 20th century, disciplines of study had turned to meaning making as a necessary method, to semiotics as the study of signs both within and outside of language, this method was preserved against other losses. If in the early 2000's it was said that over six thousand unique languages thrived on earth, how could it be that fifty years later, the world was down to roughly twenty, amongst which only two prevailed. With the death of language, some realms of knowledge cannot be accessed. It was said amongst the learned in the home of her ancestors, that the ancient science of *sīmiyā*, was a predecessor of semiotics and semiology. Why was this no longer relevant? *Sīmiyā* hinted at divine intervention in secular affairs. It was rumored amongst those innately concerned that the divine's wrath would ultimately rob Adam's offspring of all their words. The wise ones would say: like the iconoclast you believe most in the icon, and didn't the divine himself teach Adam all his words? *Sīmiyā* is a spiritual science that etymologically had connected to a rational future, even before we arrived. We are only a few years away from declaring the time precisely mid 21st century and the question of spiritual demise still haunts the handful of languages at the disposal of humanity.

It is difficult to express as an author how one might feel when one's character refuses to remember, or simply can't. Qalqalah, wants to remember a story, to be able to tell it again. To narrate history, which in part is also about a past-present. In every attempt to utter the story she stutters – the range of vocal expressions we are left with are difficult to put into writing, yet each incomplete utterance is telling, of loss, of troublesome grief. "Qalqalah, tell us..." The future is most often haunted by a coming silence. "Qalqalah," I try again, "tell us..." This time the silence singles me out. Once upon a time, I was asked, as a writer, what happens when the character interrupts the story? I shrugged; I always imagined that, in writing, one retains some degree of narrative control, that one writes out characters. Evidently, that is less true than truth itself. I am summoned to sit quietly and listen to Qalqalah's stammering, making notation of her sounds and her quivers, a coded language outside of the bounds of what I know and narrate.

How does one meet a character from the future? Is this not a temporal impossibility? Perhaps. In the history of political rupture what was anticipated was the occupation of space, few people had then spoken of the occupation of time. The scientifically daring tampered with their quantum mechanics and closed time like curves, and once in a while one would hear of someone invited to be the test-subject of traveling

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through time, although this in itself was rare. Then, others through spiritual meditation made it possible to transcend the trappings of being here and now. It became increasingly evident that in writing all sorts of oddities exist, and nearly nothing is impossible. As a writer one could easily fall through the loopholes of language, evading both time and translation.

“Qalqalah, what do you remember of History?” Indignant, she leaves the story. I resign myself to the fact that future subjects have something in common with history as a subject. I am told after the fact, that she is pursued by two editors of a journal that meet her in writing, imploring her to say something more on the subject of history. They come back with a piece of crumpled paper from the future, with little drawings. In Paris, the journal hires several cryptographers and hackers who mull over the string of glyphs and who at the time of publishing come to two distinct conclusions: on the subject of history Qalqalah’s words may have meant “it matters” whereas in the future they may come to denote that “unicorns drink ambrosia”.

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This chapter is the continuation of *Qalqalah: The Subject of Language*, published in the first issue of [Qalqalah](#). ↪



## Antariksa ←

Antariksa is an historian and co-founding member of Kunci Cultural Studies Center, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He is the author of *Tuan Tanah Kawin Muda: The relationship between LEKRA and the arts 1950-1965* (Cemeti Art Foundation, 2005), *Wider and Higher: Art and Ideology of the Left in Indonesia 1950-1965* (Regiospectra, 2015) and *Art Collectivism in the Japanese-occupied Indonesia* (Kyushu University Press, 2016).

## Biljana Ciric ←

Biljana Ciric is an independent curator based in Shanghai. She is co-curator of 2015 *Third Ural Industrial Biennale for Contemporary Art* (Yekaterinburg, Russia) and her upcoming projects include an exhibition at Kadist Art Foundation (Paris), entitled *Habits and customs of \_\_\_\_\_ are so different from ours that we visit them with the same sentiment that we visit exhibitions* ↪ as well as a curatorial seminar hosted by CCA Kitakyushu in 2016, among others. Ciric is a research fellow for 2016 at the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Norway. Her recent exhibitions include *Just as Money is the Paper, the Gallery is the Room* (2014) at Osage Art Foundation, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back—Us and Institution, Us and Institution* (2013) at the Guangzhou Times Museum, *Tino Sehgal Solo Exhibition in UCCA, Beijing* (2013), *Taking the Stage OVER* (2011–12), *Institution for the Future* — Asia Triennale, Manchester (2011), *Alternatives to Ritual* (2012–13) at the Goethe Open Space Shanghai and OCAT, Shenzhen, among others.

Her project *Migration Addicts* was presented in the Collateral Events program of the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007, and at the Biennale of Urbanism and Architecture in Shenzhen/Hong Kong in 2008. In 2013, Ciric initiated the seminar platform *From a History of Exhibitions Towards a Future of Exhibition Making*.

## Maxime Guitton ←

Maxime Guitton is in charge of the Soutien à la création, a service which supports contemporary creation through grants and funds to visual artists, publishers, art dealers, art critics and film producers at the Centre national des arts plastiques (Cnap) in Paris. Since 2003, he has been developing free-lance music programming activities in a variety of independent venues, art spaces and museums (Le BAL, CAPC, Centre Pompidou, etc.). He has been assisting composer Eliane Radigue between 2009 through 2011. His fields of research have led him to be invited by art schools and institutions for classes, workshops, lectures and listening sessions in France and Switzerland (ECAL, Ecole du Magasin, INHA, Bétonsalon, Musée de la Main UNIL-CHUV, etc.). In 2014, he curated Melissa Dubbin and Aaron S. Davidson's solo exhibition, *a drusy vein* (Treize, Paris). Along with Benoît Hické, he completed in 2015 the programming of *Montagnes: la terre exhaussée*, a cycle of film screenings, lectures and acousmatic diffusion about mountains at the National Museum of Natural History (Paris).

## Marianna Hovhannisyan ←

Marianna Hovhannisyan (Yerevan) is a curator interested in research-based practice. Her writings and curatorial work focus on contemporary art and education, archive-practice, and non-human subjects. Some exhibitions include **2012—** (Gyumri International Biennale); **Archive-Practice** research-project on the Armenian contemporary art (2008-ongoing); the collaborative exhibition **Soviet AgitArt. Restoration** (Poland, Turkey, 2008-11); **A Step Aside** (France, 2011), and in preparation for 2016, **Empty Fields**, in collaboration with SALT, Istanbul. Empty Fields is a commission by SALT and it is an outcome of Marianna's 2014-15 research fellowship (the first EU-funded Armenia-Turkey Fellowship by Hrant Dink Foundation) on American Board Archives.

Marianna holds an MA in Global Arts, Visual Cultures Department, Goldsmiths, University of London (2013-14); a BA in Art Knowledge from the Fine Arts Department, Armenian Open University (2003-07). She participated in the International Summer School for Art Curators (AICA-Armenia, 2006-09); L'École du Magasin, an independent curatorial program in France (2008-09); in 2015 **Collecting Matters** collaborative fellowship at Kadist Art Foundation.

## Clare Molloy ←

As the Kadist Curatorial Fellow 2015 Clare Molloy worked with Otobong Nkanga on the workshops and processes that developed into the exhibition **Crumbling Through Powdery Air** in July 2015 at Portikus, Frankfurt. She curated Nkanga's solo exhibition **Comot Your Eyes Make I Borrow You Mine** at Kadist Paris (Fall 2015) and was the research curator for "Diaoptasia", Nkanga's performance that premiered as part of the Tate's Performance Room series.

## Otobong Nkanga ←

Otobong Nkanga was born in 1974, Kano in Nigéria. She lives and works in Antwerp, in Belgium. A visual artist and a performer, Otobong Nkanga began her art studies at the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria and continued at the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, France. She was in the residency programme of the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam, Holland. In 2008 she obtained her Masters in Performing Arts from DasArts, Amsterdam, Holland. From June 2013 to June 2014, Otobong Nkanga was a guest of the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin residency programme in Germany. Her practice weaves together concerns about land, natural resources, architecture and the dynamic status of remembrance. Pivotal to this is examining, representing and altering ideas of geographies, home and displacement. Her works span performance, installation, sculpture, drawing, textiles, photography and video. Instead of focusing on the differences between distinct objects and environments, Nkanga focuses on their similarities and connections. For Nkanga, a crucial element connecting these concepts is memory: "Memory is not only an autobiographical state, but also an important notion in relation to objects that leave traces".

## Victoria Noorthoorn ←

Victoria Noorthoorn is the Director of the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires since August 2013. She received an M. A. in Art History from the University of Buenos Aires and an M. A. in Curatorial Studies from the Center for Curatorial Studies in Bard College, New York. She has acted as Projects Coordinator of the International Program at MoMA, New York; Assistant Curator of Contemporary Exhibitions at The Drawing Center, New York; and Curator at Malba-Fundación Costantini in Buenos Aires. She has been independent between 2004 and 2013; during this time, she curated the **29th Pontevedra Art Biennial**, in Pontevedra, Spain (2006); the **41 Salón Nacional de Artistas** in Cali, Colombia (2008); the **7th Bienal do Mercosul** in Porto Alegre, Brazil (2009); the **11<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Lyon: A Terrible Beauty Is Born** in France (2011); and **The Circle Walked Casually**, Deutsche Bank KunstHalle, Berlin (2013), among many other exhibitions. In 2011, she was nominated finalist for **The Walter Hopps Award for Curatorial Excellence**. In 2012, she was presented with the honors of the **Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres** by the French Ministry of Culture. In 2014, she was selected to attend the Global Museum Leaders Colloquium organized by The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

## Sarah Rifky ←

Sarah Rifky is a writer and curator. She is co-founder of Beirut, an art initiative, temporary school and exhibition space (2012-2015). She was curator of the Jogjakarta Biennale XII. She was curator of Townhouse (2009-2011) and curatorial agent for dOCUMENTA(13) in Kassel, Cairo and Alexandria (2012) and co-managed MASS Alexandria, with Wael Shawky (2010-2012). She taught Art History and Theory at the American University in Cairo (2010). She is co-editor of **Positionen: Zeitgenössische Künstler aus der Arabischen Welt** (2013) and author of **The Going Insurrection** (2012). She is a regular contributor to **Art in America**, **Art Agenda**, **Bidoun**, **the Exhibitionist**, and others. She is currently a PhD student at the Department of Architecture, in History, Theory + Criticism and a member of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, at MIT. She lives in Cairo and in Cambridge.

## Simon Soon ←

Simon Soon (based between Sydney and Kuala Lumpur) is a PhD Candidate in Art History at the University of Sydney under an Australian Postgraduate Award scholarship. His thesis **What is Left of Art?** investigates the intersection between left-leaning political art movements and modern urban formations in Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines from 1950s - 1970s. His broader areas of interest include comparative modernities in art, Malaysian art history, spatio-visual practices, history of photography and art historiography. Prior to undertaking academic research, he has worked as a curator and writer on contemporary Southeast Asian art. He is a member of the editorial collective for an upcoming peer-review journal **SOUTHEAST OF NOW: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art**. ↪ In 2015, he participated to **Collecting Matters**, a collaborative fellowship at Kadist Art Foundation.

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Syndicat

**Qalqalah** is the name of a polyglot heroine invented by curator and writer Sarah Rifky, who gradually loses her memory in a not-so-distant future where notions of language, art and economy as we know them today have collapsed. This heroine is appearing in two of Sarah Rifky's texts published in **Qalqalah 1** ↗ and **2**.

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## Bétonsalon – Center for Art and Research

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# KADIST

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