
Points of Departure: Collectives, Localities, Networks

After spending the whole day installing our booth, we should be ready for the opening of Unseen Amsterdam. The photography fair's 2017 edition will start tomorrow. Lars Willumeit, an independent curator and photo editor from Germany, comes over for a final check on the set-up of the Nepal Picture Library. I met Willumeit, who also trained as an anthropologist, in 2015 at the Chobi Mela, an international photography festival in Dhaka, where he gave a lecture on photo editing, and a workshop on photographic documentation. Now, he is the curator of CO-OP, a newly established platform at Unseen, dedicated to "cutting edge" artist collectives and artist-run initiatives from all over the world.

At the 2015 Chobi Mela, Willumeit also met NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati, co-founder of photo.circle (PC), a platform for photography based in Kathmandu. They connected, and Willumeit returned to the region as a workshop instructor for the 2016 edition of Photo Kathmandu. Excited about the work the platform does for photography in Nepal, he invited photo.circle's initiative, the Nepal Picture Library (NPL), to exhibit at the photography fair in Amsterdam. I came from Germany to assist with the set-up and the running of the booth, because I was psyched about the opportunity to get away from my desk and back into the "field," but also because the collective was only able to send one of its members from Nepal to the Netherlands (thanks to a grant by the Prince Claus Fund).

Our stall is located in the far-right corner of the large building. It consists of two tables, one to showcase recent PC publications and a series of postcards and prints from different NPL collections, and the other to display an exhibition entitled Retelling Histories. Coincidentally, this is the same exhibition of private family albums and formal studio portraiture that was exhibited during Chobi Mela 2015 and then travelled, in a different constitution, to the first edition of Photo Kathmandu. On the back wall, we installed The Family Album (2017), a work by Bikas Shrestha, who used a photograph from the Mukunda Bahadur Shrestha collection of NPL to demonstrate the effect of labor migration on family dynamics in Nepal. Over sixteen replications of the same family portrait taken in 1930, the artist gradually and meticulously cut out more and more able-bodied men and women, until in the last image, only the "toothless" (the old and very young members of the family) remain.

From our booth, I walk over to the opposite end of the building, past eleven artist collectives from Yogyakarta to Zurich, to reach Munem Wasif and Shimul

Saha; the artists came to Amsterdam to represent the Britto Arts Trust (britto in Bengali means “circle”), the first contemporary artist collective in Bangladesh. Like for photo.circle, the connection between Willumeit and the Britto Arts Trust (Britto) was forged during Chobi Mela 2015, where Britto’s co-founder Mahbubur Rahman and Pathshala faculty member Munem Wasif were co-curators. At Unseen, Britto is showing photography-based work by Wasif and Saha, as well as by fellow Britto members Manir Mrittik, Najmun Nahar Keya, and Mollar Sagar (as part of the film program).

Sipping on our coffees, we muse about the fact that we are now meeting in Amsterdam. We update each other on people we know and reminisce about past events. We agree that it is quite ironic that artist collectives from Nepal and Bangladesh have collaborated in so many ways over the past decade, but that they now find each other at opposite sides of a building in Amsterdam. Next time, we agree, we should make sure we have adjacent booths. But then, we would have to put a thin line in-between the two spaces and call it India—just to represent the 27km stretch separating the two nations in “real life”—we joke.

This scene from the sixth edition of *Unseen Amsterdam* highlights the main observations that marked the beginning of my ethnographic research and that shape the organization of this book. Over the past two decades, a young generation of artists from Nepal and Bangladesh (born between 1969 and 1989) to which the members of PC and Britto belong, have pushed into new spaces; the artists claim a place in international art events, foster cross-disciplinary exchange through workshops, and shape emerging formats such as public arts projects and festivals.¹ The members of Britto have initiated a neighborhood-specific public art project in Old Dhaka entitled *1 mile*². They repeatedly collaborate with the *Dhaka Art Summit (DAS)*, a large-scale perennial event dedicated to the promotion of contemporary art from the region. They facilitated Bangladesh’s first pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* in 2011. Building on the international workshops set up under the South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA), an arts-centered exchange program under the patronage of the London-based Triangle Arts Trust, they also sustain exchange with like-minded artists across the contested national borders of South Asia.² The Kathmandu-based artist-led initiative PC has organized

1 To a certain extent, the artists grew along with this book. When I started my research in 2013, most of the artists were in their late twenties or early to mid-thirties. Many had only recently graduated or were at the beginning of their careers as artists. Over the past years however, they have grown and matured, and most importantly, a new young young generation has followed, leaving their mark on the field of art. Fully aware of these developments, I nevertheless refer to the actors as the young generation since this remains the mindset with which I started this book.

2 SANA (2000–2011) connected five South Asian collectives: KHOJ (India), Vasi (Pakistan), Sutra (Nepal), Theerta (Sri Lanka), and Britto (Bangladesh). Its patron organization, the Triangle Arts Trust, is a non-profit art institution founded in New York City in 1982 by British sculptor Anthony Caro and businessperson Robert Loder. The institution’s flagship program is a perennial artist workshop—initially with artists from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada

numerous exhibitions in locations all over Nepal, from open-air rest stops near traffic junctions to high-end shopping malls. In the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake, its members rallied together a large network of people to coordinate basic relief and later the same year organized the initial edition of Photo Kathmandu (*PKTM*), a biennial photography festival combining archival and contemporary photography. The NPL, their flagship project, grew from the idea to create a multifaceted and inclusive visual repository for photographers working in and on Nepal. By calling on families to donate albums and private collections, the collective has digitized more than 60,000 photographs.³ Art Fairs, such as *Unseen Amsterdam*, constitute only one of the many avenues that these artist collectives have started to tap into.⁴ The members of Britto, PC, and other collectives in focus here are not only increasingly mobile, but also motile; they are able to move both physically and virtually, and to overcome physical, social, and institutional boundaries.⁵ With their initiatives, the collectives engage different “sectorial publics” in and outside established spaces for the production and display of art;⁶ they engage socio-cultural issues from visual heritage to urbanization, and they operate in varying localities situated across different scales (urban, regional, national). They mark a situation of transcultural contact and exchange that has been widely declared the global art world or the global contemporary.⁷

This notion of global contemporaneity celebrates the co-presence and synchronicity of diverse art worlds under the sign of globalization.⁸

(hence the name “triangle”)—now bringing together artists from all over the world. “Mission and History,” Triangle Arts Association, accessed January 31, 2023, <https://www.triangleartsnyc.org/mission-and-history>.

- 3 See “about,” accessed July 22, 2023, <https://www.nepalpicturelibrary.org/about/>.
- 4 See Lars Willumeit, “Collecting Collectives: On Multiple Multitudes,” in *Unseen Magazine*, ed. Emilia van Lynden (Amsterdam: Idea Books, 2017), 8–12. *Unseen Amsterdam* describes itself as a “platform for contemporary photography.” It was established in 2012 and exclusively focuses on new directions in the medium of photography. The three-day event, which takes place every September at Westergasfabriek, a large former gas production factory in the west of Amsterdam, comprises different formats, including a fair, a book market, an exhibition, a presentation and talk hub, as well as the 2017 newly added CO-OP space for artist collectives. “Home,” Unseen Amsterdam, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://unseenamsterdam.com/>.
- 5 John Clark, “Asian Artists as Long-Distance Cultural Specialists in the Formation of Modernities,” in *Asia through Art and Anthropology: Cultural Translation across Borders*, ed. Fuyubi Nakamura, Morgan Perkins, and Olivier Krischer (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 21.
- 6 Nina Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum: Andrea Fraser, Martha Rosler, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Renée Green* (Cologne: Walter König, 2002).
- 7 See Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World, Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2004); Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, ed., *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009); Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel, ed., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Karlsruhe: MIT Press, 2013); Thomas Fillitz, “Anthropology and Discourses on Global Art,” *Social Anthropology / Anthropologie Sociale* 23, no. 3 (2015).
- 8 Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary*.

Thereby, however, it also conceals asymmetries between established art locales (New York, London, Paris—as the site of major auction houses and other art institutions) and new entries.⁹ Among the thirteen collectives present at *Unseen Amsterdam* in 2017, only four are based outside Western Europe: Ruang MES 56 from Indonesia, Colectivo +1 from Columbia, NPL from Nepal, and Britto from Bangladesh. While this points to the persisting role of Europe in the artistic field on a proclaimed global scale, it also signals ongoing regional shifts within Asia. Rather than artists from South Asia's "central court" India,¹⁰ or Asia's "principal international [art market] hub" China,¹¹ curator Willumeit invited collectives from Nepal and Bangladesh. *CM* has become an important node for the forging and sustaining of alliances within the worldwide photographic community; both Britto and PC, as well as Willumeit, were able to compound upon the social and cultural capital they gathered during this event.

How do we begin to map a changing, dynamic contemporary situation in which large-scale international events outside the established art locales come to play an important role for the translocal movement of social capital within the network of contemporary art? How do we theorize a situation in which artists from outside the art world's confirmed locales proactively claim their space within not a global, but a multi-scalar contemporaneity? How do we, at the same time, recognize the art world's constant quest for new entries to the canon, its excitement for the different, the singular, the "deracinated" synchronous global?¹²

Artist collectives have emerged as an important driving force in the art field, particularly in South Asia. The fact that the organizing team of *Unseen* decided to add CO-OP, a space exclusively designed for artist collectives, highlights both the art market's desire for the newness that collectives (in contrast to high-profile individual artists) represent, and the recognition artist-led initiatives have received for their artistic and cultural work. Their selection for an event dedicated exclusively to new directions in photography bears testimony to the collectives' ability to produce in-demand cutting-edge work.

This book uses anthropology's strength to describe and understand cultural processes through the words and actions of the actors themselves. From my first fieldwork at the pavilion of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in Venice in 2011 to my last record at *Unseen Amsterdam* in 2017, I followed (intellectually and physically) the notion of contemporary art through the daily fabric of life, from artists' individual and collective

9 Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary*, 182.

10 Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no. 6 (2002): 650.

11 Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary*.

12 Clare Harris, "In and Out of Place: Tibetan Artists' Travels in the Contemporary Art World," in Nakamura, Perkins, and Krischer, *Asia through Art and Anthropology*, 33–34.

socio-cultural practices to their ideological and physical production of their environments. The situations I discuss outline what contemporaneity can mean beyond universally aimed and eventually homogenizing theories, such as the global contemporary, as well as beyond an anthropological relativism that reduces itself to describing what others conceive as art within the context of their visual culture.¹³ The act of art production cannot be separated from the socio-cultural and political context in which it happens, and locality remains a crucial component in the ethnographic analysis of cultural production and identity formation.¹⁴ Yet, both the locality and the culture in question need to be understood in terms of socio-cultural, spatial and disciplinary mobilities, circuits of exchange, contact, and entanglement—as constantly made and remade.¹⁵ The artists I worked with draw on their socio-cultural environment to create their pieces. Yet, this environment is not a monolithic, bounded, and territorially circumscribed space. Due to their own mobility and motility, visual references and inspirations are in constant flux, so when artists like Shrestha, whose work was exhibited in Amsterdam, draw on their socio-cultural environment they give form to the tension between situatedness and connectedness. Shrestha transfers the abstract numbers of Nepal's ongoing labor migration—for instance the high dependence on remittances (23% of the GDP in 2009) or the number of Nepali citizens living abroad (at least one member in 29% of households)—into a visually tangible representation.¹⁶ By gradually

-
- 13 For a large part of the twentieth century, the study of art in anthropology was focused on the mediation of non-Western objects to a Western public; “the emergence of relativist anthropology [put] an emphasis on placing [these] objects in specific lived contexts.” James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 228. This strategy established the objects's otherness. Objects were classified according to “their” context, which effectively meant in opposition to the Euro-American value system; they were comprised as “primitive art” (as opposed to the Western category of “fine art”), as artefacts serving a specific function (as having use value, rather than aesthetic value), or as sacred (as opposed to secular) objects. See Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins, “The Anthropology of Art: A Reflection on its History and Contemporary Practice,” in *The Anthropology of Art: A Reader*, ed. Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins (Malden: Blackwell, 2006); Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy, “Introduction: Rethinking Visual Anthropology,” in *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, ed. Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, “The Traffic in Art and Culture: An Introduction,” in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, ed. George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); James Peoples and Garrick Bailey, “Art and the Aesthetic,” in *Essentials of Cultural Anthropology*, ed. James Peoples and Garrick Bailey, (Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011); Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*; Maruška Svašek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production* (London: Pluto Press, 2007); Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1927).
- 14 See Howard Morphy, “Foreword,” in Nakamura, Perkins, and Krischer, *Asia through Art and Anthropology*, xv–xvii, xvii.
- 15 See Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna, “Understanding Transculturalism,” in *Transcultural Modernisms*, ed. Model House Research Group (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 25.
- 16 Bandita Sijapati and Amrita Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal: An Analysis of Existing Policies and Institutional Mechanisms* (Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2012), 3.

removing all able-bodied family members from the historical portrait and only leaving the young and old, he illustrates the effects of Nepal's current economic policy, and offers a new vantage point from which to rethink economic processes that shape the national imaginary.

My research is firmly situated within the larger field of transcultural studies, drawing on Fernando Ortiz's explorations to find a processual, non-linear understanding of cultural transformations in Cuba, during and after colonialism.¹⁷ Transculturality as a dynamic and processual concept operates both as research perspective and object, allowing me to transgress the idea of historically grown and delimited cultural spaces as given, and highlighting instead the transgressive and translatory qualities of cultural production.¹⁸ More specifically directed to the analysis of locality is the concept of translocality.¹⁹ It is an intermediary concept that gives access to different scales of inter-linkages and transgressions rather than playing them against each other. The notions of locality and boundary are socially and culturally produced and thus contingent upon contexts of heightened mobility.²⁰ Their scale and meaning for the actors in question (including the researcher) are constantly shifting and therefore need to be questioned and evaluated for each situation. Their circumscription can reach from specific neighborhoods to entire countries, depending on the contextual frame of reference. So can the meanings and values attached to them.²¹ Scale does not refer to a measurable geographical unit, but to the spatial scope of actions.²² Different scales of locality activate different claims, rhetorics, motivations, and strategies.²³ So rather than territorially bounded units, different scales of localities pertain to an abstraction of social actions. What is in focus is not the twenty-five kilometer stretch of

17 Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet De Onis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

18 Laila Abu-Er-Rub, Christiane Brosius, Sebastian Meurer, Diamantis Panagiotopoulos, and Susan Richter, "Introduction: Engaging Transculturality," in *Engaging Transculturality: Concepts, Key Terms, Case Studies*, ed. Laila Abu-Er-Rub, Christiane Brosius, Sebastian Meurer, Diamantis Panagiotopoulos, and Susan Richter (London: Routledge, 2019), xxviii–xxix.

19 Ulrike Freitag and Achim von Oppen, "Introduction: 'Translocality': An Approach to Connection and Transfer in Area Studies," in *Translocality: The Study of Globalising Processes from a Southern Perspective*, ed. Ulrike Freitag and Achim von Oppen (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta, ed., *Translocal Geographies: Spaces, Places, Connections* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Clemens Greiner, "Patterns of Translocality: Migration, Livelihoods and Identity in North-west Namibia," *Sociologus* 60, no. 2 (2010).

20 Freitag and von Oppen, "Introduction," 6–9.

21 See Abu-Er-Rub et al., "Introduction: Engaging Transculturality"; Monica Juneja, "A Very Civil Idea...: Art History and World-Making—With and Beyond the Nation," in Abu-Er-Rub et al., *Engaging Transculturality*; Greiner, "Patterns of Translocality."

22 See Biao Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography: An Approach for Critical Engagement with Migration and Social Change," *Ethnography* 14, no. 3 (2013): 284–285, 290.

23 Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography," 284, 290; Anna Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," in *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*, ed. Jonathan X. Inda and Renato Rosaldo (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), 453–485.

Indian territory between Nepal and Bangladesh that we joked about during *Unseen Amsterdam*, but how hegemonic nationalities shape economic and social policies, and for instance complicate exchange between Nepali and Bangladeshi artists. It is about how powerful art institutions in certain countries continue to frame the art field more than others, and about how artists have to provide passports when they travel. So rather than celebrating the art world as “placeless utopia” where artists and curators are free to circulate, and notions of nationality, religion, and ethnicity do not matter, this book is a strategy to talk about when and how scales of locality are invoked, by whom, and to what end.²⁴ For instance, when artists from the non-West are treated as spokespeople for a specific national culture,²⁵ while their Euro-American colleagues are located in a presumed global visual culture, it is important to acknowledge that anthropology’s long standing tradition of reading art within its bounded locality-culture context bears the responsibility. Other culprits in this regard are grand theories, such as Pierre Bourdieu’s or Howard Becker’s, which positioned seemingly closed-off (nationally) bounded art fields or worlds. Transculturality offers an alternative approach to contemporaneity beyond this vocabulary. Every situation I discuss, and every conception of locality (mine and that of my research partners), is invariably connected to regulations, claims, and rhetoric. Further, these situations—localities situated across a variety of scales (urban, regional, national)—are interconnected through the mobility of people, things, and ideas. Therefore, they are constantly in translation and the parameters for their boundaries need to be set anew.

It would be a mistake to assume that artists are inactive subjects in these processes, that they now lead nomadic lives and create artworks about rootedness and mobility—that they make culture, while we as anthropologists, sociologists, or art historians analyze their cultural productions. On the contrary, artists play an active part in translation and shaping processes. Much like anthropologists, they are “long-distance cultural specialists.”²⁶ I acknowledge this by calling them my research partners, and more importantly, by making their (trans-)cultural brokerage my primary research focus. What role do collective effort and collaborative action play in the emergence of a new generation of contemporary artists that increasingly claims the right to contribute to the production of its localities, and thus also its artistic fields? Or, in other words, how do the young generations’ collective, artistic practices help us (as human beings and researchers) to rethink notions of locality? The artist collectives I worked with do not merely push into new spaces. They increasingly claim the right to contribute to the mental and physical shaping of their localities. Their cultural practices transcend different worlds; they transgress

24 Harris, “In and Out of Place,” 33–34.

25 Néstor García Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself: Anthropology for a Society without a Story Line*, trans. David Frye (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 47.

26 Clare Harris, “The Buddha Goes Global: Some Thoughts towards a Transnational Art History,” *Art History* 29, no. 4 (2006): 698–720, 699.

distinct boundaries, from fostering exchange across South Asia's contested borders, marked by colonialism and partition, to engaging with spaces commonly not perceived as spaces of artistic production.²⁷ They transmit knowledge between different visual discourses, thereby both proactively and unconsciously changing the discourses they enter or to which they return. However, this is not a matter of linear transmission or translation, from the visual discourse they have emerged from (been educated and socialized in) to that of an other (national, regional, or global). Much like localities and cultures, visual discourses are not territorially bounded, but related to flows of knowledge, education, media, practice, traditions.²⁸ This means that the values and norms indicating one discourse are always already in relation to other visual discourses, thus constantly being relativized, negotiated, changed. Often artists are not aware of the effect their physical and virtual mobility has on these visual discourses. At other times, they consciously use their works or projects to question hegemonic narratives of national identity, religion, and gender roles. Their activities raise questions about the kind of localities circumscribed and presented in exhibition formats such as the *DAS* or the *Venice Biennale*, as well as about the actors making and controlling these claims. The artists in this book generate dialogical spaces in and through their artworks; they open up new forms of knowledge production, of understanding, of negotiating, and of interdependence.

Underlying these observations about artist collectives in Nepal and Bangladesh is a tension between notions of situatedness and connectedness, autonomy and transgression. This not only pertains to the relation between locality and mobility/motility, but also to the way collectivity and collaborative action are understood. Artists have individual reasons to join collectives: access to further education, workshops, studio space, creative outlets, contact to like-minded people, or opportunities to exhibit and sell their work. The format of the collective enables artists to engage and take position in contemporary discourses, to assert themselves *vis-à-vis* established institutions (national academies, galleries, and foundations), and thus claim agency as a "local community" in shaping the conditions for the art practice in their artistic field.²⁹ Initiatives like the *PKTM* festival or public art projects like *1mile²* aim towards a collective advancement of contemporary art, the strengthening of group-identity (as artists, as photographers, or as creatives), the generation of social, cultural, and economic capital, and socio-political change.³⁰ The situatedness or groundedness

27 Harris, "The Buddha Goes Global," 699.

28 Compare to Clark, "Asian Artists," 21.

29 Tayeba Begum Lipi, "Extending and Expanding the Idea and Space," in *SANA: South Asian Network for the Arts*, ed. Pooja Sood (New York: Ford Foundation, 2014), 167–173, 172.

30 In line with Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical explorations, I discern three different types of capital: economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital, in this case, comprises the monetary resources artists have at their disposal, through their family background, the sale of artworks, commissions, or full-time occupations.

within individual or local needs however, is only ever temporary; it is dislocated, reevaluated, transgressed, and (re)situated with every contact and (inter)action. Beyond collectives like PC or Britto, there is a larger sense of artistic commonality, a need for artists to feel connected and supported across large geographical distances, especially in localities that cannot rely on the economic and infrastructural support of well-established art institutions. What is needed is an analytic framework that recognizes the tension between a desire for autonomy—to act from and for a local community—and an urgency to connect to a wider, multi-scalar network of contemporary art. Focusing on collaborative practices from a transcultural practice and through anthropological methods, especially participant observation and semi-structured interviews, allows for this framework.

When I invoke the term community, I mean neither a territorially bounded group of people that share a system of cultural traits and values,³¹ nor the type of utopian, egalitarian community in which power asymmetries based on ethnicity, nationality, class, sexuality, or gender have been overcome in the name of art, as Clare Harris has described.³² I posit an imaginary, contemporary collectivity that allows for the tension to persist between artists celebrated or commodified on account of their newness and difference, and artists connecting (not for a lack of difference but) because of similar ways of approaching life through art.

Compared to art history or philosophy, and given its preference for emic viewpoints, anthropology seems rather ill equipped to offer a new definition of art. Due to its long-term qualitative approach however, it allows access to “the kind of experimental knowledge that lets you talk convincingly, from the gut, about what it feels like” to be a member of the contemporary fields of art in (between) Bangladesh and Nepal.³³ In other words,

This capital can be put towards collective acquisitions, for example, such as real estate or equipment. Bourdieu defines social capital as the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.” Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 248–249. This could be connections to other artists, curators, key players in art, or funding institutions, which the collective shares among its members. Cultural capital, acquired through formal education or home background, represents the knowledge that allows individuals, for instance, to recognize and understand “legitimate” works of art. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2010 [1984]); Bourdieu, “Forms of Capital,”; Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009 [1993]).

31 See Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport, “Prologue: The Book’s Questions,” in *The Trouble with Community: Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity*, ed. Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 1–10, 3; Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, (Chinester: Ellis Horwood & Tavistock, 1985), 15.

32 Harris, “The Buddha Goes Global,” 33–34.

33 Russell H. Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006), 342.

long-term participant observation offers insight into where and when contemporary art happens, against what its practices are directed, and which borders it tries to transgress. I use art as a heuristic device, an analytical and connective force, which serves as a tool for the critical engagement with different scales of localities, boundaries, and communities, and which connects artists via their critical engagement with these concepts. Through my case studies, I trace a notion of contemporaneity that (like locality and culture) is processual, grown within a visual discourse marked by exchange and mobility. It is shaped by relations between institutions and individuals, and specific to the situations in which it is invoked.³⁴ This alternative contemporaneity is not confined to the autonomous space of the artist studio or the museum. Rather, its symbolic production emerges from a network of interconnected situations, such as the large-scale perennial event, the public space, the gallery, and a historical building.³⁵ Artists are researchers and thinkers, actively negotiating the diverse claims to these localities. They make use of vernacular visual histories and architectural heritage in order to ask new questions, or old questions anew. Contemporary art is a place where questions are translated and retranslated;³⁶ it arises from a contestation of fine art curriculums and canons as well as current socio-political discourses.

Bringing together collectives, localities, and networks, this book adds to current theoretical debates on contemporary art and processes of global connectedness from the perspective of transculturality and is anchored within anthropological research. In the remainder of this introduction, I map contemporary cultural production beyond all-encompassing universalist theories to offer an alternative actor-centered perspective on globalization processes. The collectives and their initiatives are key in my analysis of a multi-scalar contemporary art field built on a tension between autonomy and connectedness. My ethnography is firmly based within a transcultural research frame. Therein, I contribute to the development of a more nuanced discussion of the still crucial notion of locality by looking at it through the transgressive and transcultural brokerage of contemporary artists. Lastly, I propose a reconfiguration of multi-sited ethnography from the perspective of recent theories on translocality. I present scale and network as analytical tools that allow me to reconcile anthropology's commitment to locality and its interest in global processes.

34 See Svašek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production*, 6.

35 Bourdieu considers art production to be the result of a material and symbolic production. The latter is realized by a set of agents including critics and museum and gallery managers, and allows the beholder or consumer to recognize an artwork's value as such. The term consumer refers to all actors that offer legitimacy to the art production by supporting, visiting, participating in, reading about, and following artists and their work. Bourdieu differentiates three types of consumers: other producers of artworks, the elites or dominant class, and the "popular" or ordinary consumers. Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 35, 50.

36 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 112.

COLLECTIVES

The generation of artists I am interested in marks a specific set of people: the vast majority received a secondary education from a fine arts institution, and either grew up in an urban, middle class environment, or settled in the city during or after their studies. This narrow focus excludes a large number of other artists in Nepal and Bangladesh, from older generations of artists to producers of art commonly categorized as religious and/or traditional. Within this still large set of interest here, I followed those artists that are (or were at some point in their life) actively involved with collectives, or at the least regularly participated in collaborative formats.³⁷

During my preliminary research, the term collective was an emic category that the actors I was interested in used to describe themselves on their websites, social media accounts, and in program descriptions. The more I wanted to grasp what this collectivity meant in terms of everyday practices, the broader the notion became. Sometimes the only common denominator was some kind of collaborative activity created by artists for the benefit of other artists. This is due to the fact that the regularity of activities was, and still is, heavily dependent on available funding and members' individual (artistic or private) engagements and schedules. Formally, the collectives are registered either as NGOs, trusts, or non-business entities, but with each initiative and event I observed, the dynamic within changed: the frequency of meetings varied, hanging-out spaces shifted, members left, and others joined. There were times during my research when it felt like Britto barely existed, with all its members involved in their own personal projects. At other times, residencies, workshops, lectures, and group exhibitions happened simultaneously, creating a huge buzz for all participants. Further, the character of the collectives is contingent on the physical form they take. In 2012, Britto inaugurated Britto Space, a multi-purpose gallery, workshop, and guest room in a semi-commercial building on Green Road in Dhaka. PC has its own offices in Patan, one of the three cities in the Kathmandu valley, which it regularly uses as workshop space or as a hang out spot for staff and friends.³⁸ A twenty-minute walk away, Bindu—A Space for Artists (Bindu) operates from co-founders Sauganga Darshandhari and Prithvi Shrestha's apartment-cum-studio, offering a place for hanging out, for residencies, and talks. Further, most collectives run through a variety of avatars over the years. Drik (Sanskrit for "vision") for instance was founded in 1989 by photographer Shahidul

37 I conducted interviews with fifty-nine artists overall, but throughout my research (2013–2017) shared interactions and conversations with more than two hundred artists in Nepal and Bangladesh.

38 The Kathmandu valley (roughly 30×35 km) houses the three major cities of the country: Kathmandu, Patan (Lalitpur), and Bhaktapur. Patan and Kathmandu have grown so extensively that the transition from one to the other is no longer clearly visible. In common usage, the term Kathmandu (and by extension the city) thus often comprises the entire urbanized part of the valley, including all three cities.

Alam as a space for photography in Dhaka. It started as a darkroom and a studio, to which a gallery and a library were added. Today Drik is a multi-layered organization, comprising Bangladesh's first school for photography, the Pathshala South Asia Media Institute, a photography agency Majority World, and the biennially organized *CM*. Depending on the shape they take in a particular situation, the forms of collectivity I encountered could thus be described through affective notions (friendship or family), terms pertaining to their form (centers, spaces, or networks), or to their durability (institution or complicity). However, these concepts only proved useful when describing specific activities and formats, not the collaboration as a more durable entity.

"Complicity," as argued by cultural theorist Gesa Ziemer, marks an intensive relationship between a small, heterogeneous circle of creative and inspired people, who come together to realize a common goal.³⁹ They operate pragmatically, swiftly, and imaginatively. Once the common goal is achieved, however, they break apart, much like criminals planning and succeeding at robbing a bank. While Ziemer's work on complicity remains one of the only theoretical engagements with notions of collective creativity, it proves ill fitted to discuss long-term connections. Likewise, Grant H. Kester's more descriptive approach, which is directed towards site-specific collaborative projects, does not allow him to reach a circumscription of what collective practice, beyond the realization of a specific project, entails.⁴⁰ Hans Peter Thurn traces a longer history of collaborations from *Künstlergruppen* (artist groups), *Künstlergemeinschaften* (artist communities), and *Künstlerkolonien* (artist colonies) and focuses on the values that motivate such alliances, notably shared views, interests, and aims.⁴¹ He asserts that the intensive exchange of ideas, the collaboration in works or exhibitions, as well as the mutual encouragement and support of like-minded people boosts creativity. He however concludes that the collective is often a transitional phase—a strategy of self-empowerment between graduating and launching a successful individual career. Like Ziemer and Kester, he treats the eventual end of most alliances like a natural progression. Richard Florida's notion of the "creative class" is directed to a seemingly more enduring group of creatives.⁴² Beyond acknowledging their existence at the interface of art, the global market, and a rapid, global expansion of neoliberal mechanisms, however, Florida does not offer much of an explanation as to how different members of this "creative class" interact with localities and their infrastructure.

39 Gesa Ziemer, *Komplizenschaft: Neue Perspektiven auf Kollektivität* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), 9–11.

40 Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

41 Hans P. Thurn, "Die Sozialität des Solitären," *Kunstforum International* 116 (1991).

42 Richard Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class," in *The Urban Sociology Reader*, ed. Jan Lin and Christopher Mele (London: Routledge, 2010); Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class, Revisited* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

Instead of attempting a theoretical adjustment of one of these concepts to make it productive for long-term analysis, I decided to use the artists' self-chosen term "collective" as a heuristic device—a *Denkfigur* (model or figure of thought) for collective effort and a potential for creative process.⁴³ The openness of the notion allowed me to gradually establish characteristics that I could then use to analyze how each collective works in the particular situations I studied. Over time, it became clear that the collectives and what connects or differentiates them are more than the sum of situational instances of social, joint, and directed acting. My case studies show that fluid forms of contact can lead to more sustained relations.⁴⁴ These relations rely on a tension between affinity and autonomy. The collective is a mode of togetherness that offers artists support and companionship. This support is characterized in terms of access to economic, social, and cultural capital, but also in collaboratively organizing programs and sharing the responsibilities of planning, execution, and outcome. Collaboration consists in a mutual understanding of the demands and challenges of art practice beyond specific projects. It manifests in the formal exchange of knowledge during workshops as well as in the casual sharing of news and stories while hanging out. It can lead to long-lasting friendships, even marriages, but also to fallouts and feuds.

At the same time, the collective offers autonomy, especially in the material and conceptual production of artworks, but also in life in general. The collectives I looked at are based on an underlying belief in democratic values (freedom of speech, equality, critical thinking, common good). They are inclusive of different ethnicities, languages, religions, and, to a certain extent, political beliefs. Membership is based on affinity—the conscious decision to focus on collectively furthering the practice of contemporary art. Based on this autonomy, collectives also allow for (even encourage) behaviors less accepted within the family or the wider society. Collective spaces are often considered safe spaces in which artists are free to break with religious and socio-cultural norms such as wearing clothes considered inappropriate in other social situations, or consuming illegal or unaccepted substances. Nevertheless, the collectives are neither a replacement

43 See Rachel Mader, "Einleitung," in *Kollektive Autorschaft in der Kunst: Alternatives Handeln und Denkmodell*, ed. Rachel Mader (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), 8.

44 Christian Kravagna expands on Mary Louise Pratt's definition of the "contact zone" as "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict," and applies it to the art practice. He stresses the collaborative factor and defines "contact" in relation to *Begegnung* (encounter), *Austausch* (exchange), and *Allianz* (alliance). He emphasizes the transgression of colonial and cultural boundaries, as well as the "de-centered," "multilateral," and "intentional" nature of artistic contact. This understanding stands in contrast to the term impact, which Kravagna relates to forms of European modernist "cultural appropriation" and inspiration. Christian Kravagna, *Transmoderne: Eine Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts* (Berlin: b_books, 2017), 50; Mary L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5–6.

for, nor in competition with kinship relations. Rather, they offer a counter-balance—a place to take a break from family responsibilities. Collectives are not free of rules either; membership comes with a set of responsibilities and loyalties. These include the willingness to contribute time and physical and mental energy in the realization of projects, the sharing of social, cultural, and on occasion also economic capital, as well as the commitment to mutual respect, loyalty, and trust.

A similar tension of autonomy and affinity is at work on a bigger scale in the relation between different collectives. It is here that the idea of a “border-transgressing artist community” emerges—an idea or potentiality that contemporary artists are connected through their art practice while simultaneously assuming their own position in the field. Beyond the collective, I thus needed a theoretical frame to grasp an emerging understanding of contemporaneity through this tension between autonomy and relatedness on different scales.

In *Art Beyond Itself*, Néstor García Canclini describes a new contemporary situation in which “art has left its autonomy behind.”⁴⁵ Artists have been incorporated into a large-scale art market and proactively insert themselves into society. Therefore, they have to find new strategies for creative transgression and critical dissent that neither spectacularize socio-political issues in order to force the reaction of their audience, nor risk trapping them in an infernal circle of transgressions that have no effect on the status quo. Our task as researchers, Canclini contends, is to map frictions and to outline how creators negotiate the meaning of their works in relation to cultural industries. He makes it clear that the “postautonomous condition” is not a radically new stage and that the autonomy of art still plays a role.⁴⁶ Yet, grand theories based entirely on an autonomous logic are not suitable to deal with this new condition. When Bourdieu and Becker wrote about autonomous circuits and the boundaries of art and literature, they were dealing only with museums in the centers of the art world and not with the transcultural connections of over two hundred biennales and art fairs.⁴⁷ Bourdieu’s attempts to organize art in terms of aesthetic prescriptions, codified knowledge, and self-justifiable effects was, and remains, especially unconvincing. According to Canclini, Bourdieu stretched the logic of the field as entirely autonomous too far, thus limiting himself in dealing with innovation, the creative role of individuals, and the links between the art field and society.⁴⁸ However, I agree with Canclini when he concedes that we should neither proclaim the death of art and its autonomy because much of art is found outside the field, nor turn our backs on pieces of knowledge and methods that can still be useful.⁴⁹

45 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 20.

46 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 180.

47 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 19.

48 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 178.

49 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 19.

Howard Becker rightly asserted that every artistic creation depends on an extensive division of labor. He emphasized the need for a system of art-related professionals, which he comprises as an “art world.”⁵⁰ He borrows the term from Arthur Danto but extends the notion from Danto’s New York-centered “artworld” to a plurality of “art worlds,” recognizing a more dynamic, pluri-centric notion of the actors and institutions involved in the artistic practice.⁵¹ Becker’s extension of the concept does not go far enough, however, as it neither allows a nuanced approach to different scales of relatedness, nor to the characteristics of these relations.⁵² Further, he focuses solely on the professional system, thereby ignoring other kinds of support.⁵³ Many of my interview partners use the term friendship to describe the support they receive from fellow artists. Friendship here is an “idiom of affinity and togetherness.”⁵⁴ It describes a relationship that proactively highlights similarities (same occupation, interests, class) over differences that could possibly separate.⁵⁵ These similarities are the basis for emotional and cognitive support, which range from empathy for personal struggles to practice-related feedback. It is an emphasis on similarities that allows artists to identify with a wider artist community. Both idioms—friendship and the artist community—differ from the art world in that (like the collective) they are emic categories, and that they emphasize affective qualities (shared creative values and needs) over more formal, professional, and economically-driven relations. The artist community that my interview partners refer to is comprised of “real,” face-to-face relations (people who regularly meet at art events, in school, or in workshops) and potential interactions, based on the idea that like-minded artists can be found anywhere in the world and that there is knowledge to be gained from fostering exchange with such artists. Emic notions help me describe the way that artists emotionally qualify certain relationships and demarcate them from others, but they are not sufficient to describe the large set of multi-scalar connections in which my research partners engage.

50 Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 13.

51 Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964).

52 The use of the term relatedness in anthropology marks an attempt to rethink the narrow, often biologically determined definitions of kinship—a central focus in anthropology since the establishment of the field—to account for new models of family life, or, for instance, the changes brought forth by reproductive technologies. It has, as I wish to emphasize, also allowed anthropologists to focus on other types of relations, such as “fictive kinship” or friendship, following Amit Desai and Evan Killick. Amit Desai and Evan Killick, ed., *The Ways of Friendship: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Berghahn Books 2013 [2010]), 2; Daniel Miller, “The Ideology of Friendship in the Era of Facebook,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (June 2017); Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

53 See Svašek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production*, 94–95.

54 Claudia Barcellos Rezende, “Building Affinity Through Friendship,” in *The Anthropology of Friendship*, ed. Sandra Bell and Simon Coleman (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 92–93.

55 Rezende, “Building Affinity Through Friendship.”

In contrast to Canclini's critical assessment, I comprehend Bourdieu's field theory as hinging on a tension between autonomy and relation. Bourdieu describes a field balanced between a heteronomous (as completely subject to external laws of economic and political profit) and an autonomous (as completely autonomous from these laws) principle of hierarchization.⁵⁶ His conception of relative autonomy calls attention to the fact that the production of art is not only shaped by internal rules (from within the artistic field), but also subject to external laws of economic profit and political power. In other words, the positions that actors and their artworks take in the field are always subject to both internal aesthetic and external economic and political values. He offers a valid approach to both intimate object-environment relations and the larger frame in which these are embedded. My initial concern with Bourdieu was thus not about how relational or relative his conception of the field is, but about its entanglement with the scale of the national. Larissa Buchholz already aptly argued that concepts like society or power cannot simply be scaled up from their context of origin in Western nationally circumscribed societies to the global scale.⁵⁷ Bourdieu does account for a transposition of his theory from one nation-state to the other, but not from one scale to another, nor for the changes in theoretical architecture that this would demand.⁵⁸

The increased interconnectedness in (between) the contemporary artistic field(s), pushed by a young generation of contemporary artists in Nepal and Bangladesh, is not merely an opening up of two art fields to influences from outside (styles, materials, formats, and so on). Likewise, it is not the establishment of networks of exchange beyond the national frame with supranationally operating institutions (such as the Prince Claus Fund or the Ford Foundation). It is the emergence of a new contemporary artistic field that is not bound to one (national or international) scale. It is translocal; it has effects on and activates actors and institutions within the same city, the region, the country, and on other continents. How do we salvage Bourdieu's relational theory for an approach to this emergence? How do we write about art field(s) from a transcultural perspective and in the context of a multi-scalar oriented contemporaneity that is able to account for both short-term, energetic forms of collaboration and more long-term connections?

Buchholz demonstrates that the field theory can be refitted for a translocal approach to show how globally operating fields remain articulated and interdependent despite markets and socio-political topics encroaching on their autonomy.⁵⁹ Her method consists of an analytical reduction of Bourdieu's field to three defining and scale-invariant characteristics: first,

56 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*.

57 Larissa Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field? Theorizing Fields Beyond the Nation-State," *The Sociological Review* 64, no. 2 (2016).

58 Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?" 31-34.

59 Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?"

the belief that art practice is distinctive, independent, and more valuable than other practices; second, the establishment of a hierarchy that gives legitimacy through peer criteria (as opposed to external principles of evaluation); and third, the formation of a distinctive institutional infrastructure. The notion of autonomy she distills from Bourdieu is the relative autonomy of a field governed by a logic distinctive to that field. This logic describes the way in which people see the world and devise categories and hierarchies through specific training or education. Nevertheless, this type of functional autonomy based on a sphere of specialized practice is not absolute, nor does it preclude external influences. Furthermore, it is not sufficient to accurately comprehend a field operating on a multi-continental scale of geographic expansion. Buchholz thus proposes a second kind of autonomy: a vertical autonomy that is different to the autonomy of other field levels in meaning and direction, but not in a hierarchical manner. Applying this vertical autonomy to her own research, Buchholz is able to show that new forms of transnational or global capital bring new institutional practices of classifying and assessing artistic recognition; there are new conceptions of value in global terms, new principles of hierarchy, and new types of global capital.⁶⁰

Buchholz's approach to global art circuits takes an institutional perspective, but she indicates that vertical autonomy could be used for a theorization of the strategies of agents, oriented towards different field levels and thus enacting different meanings in relation to these levels.⁶¹ The fact that nearly all my research partners graduated from a fine arts institution seems to indicate that a fine arts degree has become a prerequisite to enter the field. The art school is where prospective artists learn the values particular to the field, where they become fluent in a distinctive practice, as opposed to other fields such as literature, medicine, or business management. Further, there are specific institutions dedicated to art in Nepal and Bangladesh. Museums, galleries, and especially the national academies, which, through their annual national exhibitions, exhibit, judge, and award art in a peer-reviewed process. However, the emerging generation of contemporary artists in focus here is no longer dependent on the values and hierarchies prescribed by these nationally structured fields. The collectives adopt a multi-positionality in a multi-scalar field. They offer new ways for education by organizing workshops and bringing in educators from other fields and localities. Through events like *1mile²* or *PKTM*, artists are no longer limited to the national exhibitions as peer-reviewed legitimacy. By positioning themselves on multiple scales, they access a new network of peers, from their fellow collective members to international curators that give their practice value. Nevertheless, this is not about discarding the national frame. On the contrary, my research partners have no issue with participating in the national

60 Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?" 41–43.

61 Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?" 43–44.

exhibitions while simultaneously engaging with the SANA and the *Venice Biennale*. Hence, there is a relative autonomous logic of competition at play in the nationally circumscribed localities of Nepal and Bangladesh, sustained by the education system and other national art institutions. But emerging from that field is a contemporary situation characterized by actors that consciously claim multi-positionality and a multi-scalar scope of action.

On a more critical note, Buchholz fails to consider that the absence of hierarchy and directionality do not necessarily entail an absence of friction, especially in the contestation of value. In Buchholz' explorations, value exclusively indicates economic competition. In my observations, value is a more open category that is co-defined by the artists and the collective depending on the situation. Buchholz (and Canclini) comprehend the global market as a new crucial actor in determining symbolic and economic value within the global field. I do not deny the markets' power in these processes of value negotiation. I suggest that here, too, focusing on the tension between autonomy and connectedness allows us to consider the artists' agency within global circuits of capital. Depending on the aim and scope of the project (the context of the situation), artists have the agency to choose which circuits they connect to and from which they want to stay autonomous. Most collectives operate on a non-profit basis and are based on a non-hierarchical ideal of equal status and reciprocity. In many cases, social and cultural capital are emphasized over economic capital. This is especially the case in collective projects, which are often directed towards collective goals. In workshops for instance, the collectives often remain autonomous from the market and focus on experimentation and process, rather than on a finished product. In exhibitions, performances, or talks, the collective members may also choose to address their views on national, urban, and gender identities, thereby seeking to engage with diverse members of the society or to influence wider socio-political discourses. They act as part of a civil society that promotes values such as equality, autonomy, freedom, and contract,⁶² and through specific actions try to influence public policy.⁶³ Nevertheless, these strategies should not be interpreted as a utopic leftist ideal of collectivity nor as a binary opposition to a capitalist market. They are part of ongoing negotiations over the value of art in which the artists are actively taking part. They are neither autonomous from, nor entirely determined by the market. In order to sharpen this discussion on artists' agency, I propose to look at artists as transcultural brokers.

62 See Partha Chatterjee, "On Civil and Political Society in Post-Colonial Democracies," in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, ed. Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 172.

63 See Charles Taylor, "Invoking Civil Society," in *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*, ed. Robert E. Goodin and Philip Pettit (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 66.

(TRANS)CULTURAL BROKERS

Eric Wolf first used the term broker to describe actors who, using a canny manipulation of culture-specific social ties, mediate between the scale of the community and the nation.⁶⁴ Their position within an arena of continuously changing friendships and alliances allows these actors to gain access to social, economic, and cultural capital. However, theirs is also a dangerous position, as the brokers represent competition for other power holders. Brokers assume nodes of contact that connect between scales of the local and the national and between different scales of power. They must serve both sides, balancing a tension without ever fully resolving it, as their own usefulness depends on this tension to persist.⁶⁵ While Wolf locates cultural brokerage between different scales of the same cultural context, Marc von der Höh, Nikolas Jaspert, and Jenny Oesterle develop three types of cross-cultural brokerage.⁶⁶ The first concerns people who live in and communicate with a cultural environment different from their own, such as migrants or merchants. The second type pertains to people who deliberately convey messages from one cultural environment into another, diplomats or missionaries for instance. The last comprises people who mediate between two cultural spheres without fully being part of either, such as Jewish traders in medieval Muslim or Christian courts. The scholars further distinguish between latent transference, as a byproduct of other activities (trade or pilgrimage), and manifest or intentional transference of cultural messages.⁶⁷ Clare Harris introduces the idea of the itinerant artist as a long-distance cultural specialist, i.e., cultural producers whose practices transcend different worlds. Rather than of bounded cultures, like Wolf, von der Höh, Jaspert, and Oesterle, Harris refers to the “cultural logic” of one place or field. This logic is not erased on departure from its field and remains as a memory and an “eminently transportable toolbox of art praxis” that can be reused over space and time.⁶⁸ Harris’ main goal is to show that this transmission of visual information does not necessarily happen along the central axis of Euro–America, as is often assumed within hegemonic globalization discourses; it is multidirectional and can begin and end in diverse sites. In contrast to the previously mentioned scholars, John Clark introduces a third virtual or imagined space for a synthetic visual discourse between visual cultures.⁶⁹ He argues that when artists, as technical specialists, carry knowledge from one local visual discourse into

64 Eric R. Wolf, “Aspects of Group Relations in a Complex Society: Mexico,” *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 6 (1956).

65 Wolf, “Aspects of Group Relations,” 1076.

66 Marc von der Höh, Nikolas Jaspert, and Jenny R. Oesterle, “Courts, Brokers and Brokerage in the Medieval Mediterranean,” in *Cultural Brokers at Mediterranean Courts in the Middle Ages*, ed. Marc von der Höh, Nikolas Jaspert, and Jenny R. Oesterle (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013).

67 Von der Höh, Jaspert, and Oesterle, “Courts, Brokers and Brokerage,” 23–24.

68 Harris, “The Buddha Goes Global,” 699.

69 Clark, “Asian Artists.”

that of an Other, into an imaginary third space, or back into their originating discourse, the latter loses its hegemony. Its sovereignty and determination for the production of art are relativized as its values now exist in relation to those of other systems.⁷⁰ Whereas Harris opens up the possibility of seeing art producers as cultural brokers, Clark's notion is by far the most useful in a transcultural approach. He shows that mobile artists do not actually leave one discourse to enter another while mediating between the two. Instead of taking elements (or tools as Harris calls them) from one grounded sphere to another, they create a third virtual space with elements of the diverse discourses they encounter. From this third visual space, the discourse they emerged from (shaped by upbringing, media consumption, formal education, etc.) is relativized and changed. Therefore, artists often experience being "outside" their originating discourse as a freedom, an undominated space in-between where imagination and art-discursive realization are unrestrained.⁷¹ Clark's notion of brokerage thus opens the venturing of artists into new spaces as a site of analysis. It might explain why artists feel creatively inspired by their travels and why they consciously expose themselves to new elements of visual culture. It offers a lens to look at large-scale events, international workshops, and art parties as crucial nodes of connection. Transcultural brokerage helps artists relativize, negotiate, and rethink knowledge they have gained in their field and, in the process, create something new.⁷² Further, transcultural mediation or brokerage is not about resolving the tension between two discourses or scales that are conceived as separate (local-global or Nepal-Bangladesh), it is, as Wolf argued, about keeping this tension alive. Through the tension, artists gain not only creative impulses but also access to capital, which they then can mediate to other actors in the field. Collectives especially facilitate communication between their members and other members of the art world (from fellow artists to biennale directors). Thereby they negotiate religious, linguistic, and socio-economic differences while often marking that cultural difference through their presence.⁷³ Contemporary artists both proactively and unconsciously use art as a medium to change the discourses they enter or return to as well as to transgress hegemonic and normative notions of culture and locality. However, this is not a matter of linear translation from the visual discourse they emerged from (were educated or socialized in) to that of an Other (national, regional, or global) discursive context. Much like localities and cultures, visual discourses are not territorially bounded; they relate to flows of knowledge, education, media, and practice traditions.⁷⁴

70 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21.

71 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21–22.

72 Carola May and Anja Saretzki, "Interkulturelle versus transkulturelle Räume des Kulturtourismus," in *Kulturelle Übersetzer: Kunst und Kulturmanagement im transkulturellen Kontext*, ed. Christiane Dätsch (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 393.

73 Von der Höh, Jaspert, and Oesterle, "Courts, Brokers and Brokerage."

74 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21.

It is important to note that not all artists are cultural brokers or broker culturally all the time. The discourse from which they emerged is a site of discursive stability, i.e., relatively autonomous. It is not a closed, settled field or a site of denial of change/variation. Staying overseas, participating in residencies abroad or joining international education programs facilitates experimentation with the patterns of this discourse, but the experience is not the same for every artist. Traveling does not automatically make artists specialists in two or more cultural/visual discourses,⁷⁵ nor are the artists the only people involved in brokering. Wolf broaches the potential for friction when he elaborates on the competition between brokers and other power holders.⁷⁶ In the artistic field, this could be collectors, curators, or foundations who have their own agendas and broker accordingly. Further, artists are not always in control of the cultural elements they broker; in biennales and exhibitions they might involuntarily be treated as spokespeople for specific national cultures and be expected to broker certain styles or motifs by curators, audiences, or the media. Lastly, cultural brokerage is contingent upon mobility, but mobility does not always necessarily involve the physical mobility of people. For a trans-cultural perspective, it is important to consider motility as well as actual mobility.⁷⁷ Motility is the ability to move both physically and virtually; to see if an artist is able to move across expanded geographical distances allows for instance access to information on their financial resources, the validity of their passport, their access to digital media, their social connections as well as their cultural capital. This in turn can influence the content and scope of their brokerage.

The transdisciplinary field of mobilities has focused on the complex and dynamic entanglements caused by the movement of ideas, people, and objects. It has shown that there are different kinds of mobilities, from the sociological canon to the spatial mobilities of humans, objects, information, and images, as well the means (transport, infrastructure, and technologies) enabling this mobility.⁷⁸ I want to guide attention to three types of mobilities relevant for transcultural brokerage: disciplinary, socio-cultural, and spatial mobilities. As part of their claim to shape the locality in which they dwell or work, contemporary artists contest the existing art infrastructure. Especially the still vastly eurocentric fine arts framework with its canon of European masters is subject to their critique. As a result, my research partners cultivate disciplinary mobilities. Chapters three and four of this book deal with these disciplinary mobilities through specific case studies: on the one hand, my research partners express an interest in the often marginalized national and regional art histories of Nepal and Bangladesh. On the

75 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21–22.

76 Wolf, "Aspects of Group Relations," 1071–1072, 1076.

77 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21–22.

78 See Mimi Sheller, "The New Mobilities Paradigm for a Live Sociology," *Current Sociology Review* 62, no. 6 (2014); John Urry, "Mobile Sociology," *The British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 1 (2010).

other hand, they aim to break free from the medium-specific organization of the university and college departments. Activities organized by artist-led initiatives have become a site where new mediums (installation, performance, digital art)⁷⁹ can be tested and where exchange with disciplines outside the art canon (theater, music, or photography)⁸⁰ can happen. Further, discursive practices such as artist talks, workshops, “art writing,” and other forms of mediation are increasingly part of the art practice.⁸¹ Artists do not focus on making artworks. They want to shape the discursive field around them. While the majority of fine arts curricula in place in Nepal and Bangladesh emphasize manual training, the collectives have become a space of, and for, art-related activities.

In a similar line, the artists I focus on stimulate socio-cultural mobilities. They question prevailing asymmetries (such as between Hindus and Muslims in Bangladesh, or between high-caste Brahmins and ethnic minorities in Nepal) and actively foster social inclusivity and transcultural exchange. All the case studies presented in this book contain instances of this type of brokerage, but chapter five discusses the collectives’ strategies in more detail: the initiatives, for instance, seek unconventional exhibition spaces outside predominantly middle class neighborhoods and established art spaces in order to foster socio-cultural diversity and break up established boundaries. Further, the collectives’ own constitution reflects their transgression of hegemonic socio-cultural hierarchies. Without exception, all the artist-run initiatives I worked with comprised members from diverse ethnicities and religions; they included atheists, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus of different castes and social backgrounds. Thereby, they differ from other fields of art production, such as “traditional” *Mithila* or *Thanka/Poubha* painting. These practices and the related transfer of knowledge largely remain organized according to

79 I use the plural form mediums to refer exclusively to artistic materials. In contrast, I use the plural form “media” to describe means of communication such as television, radio, or newspapers. “New mediums” are artistic practices that crosscut the boundaries of the classic fine art mediums such as painting, sculpture, and printmaking. The notion is an umbrella term for a variety of practices such as mixed media, installation, performance, and new media art. It can also refer to projects or works that transcend the discipline of visual arts in a broader sense such as those engaging music, theater, or dance. In contrast, the term new media refers to a variety of media that can be created and displayed through digital electronic devices (digital images, digital video, e-books, and so on).

80 In both Nepal and Bangladesh, photography remains excluded from the governmental fine arts curriculum at the time of my research.

81 David Carrier uses the term “art writing” to refer “to texts by both art critics and art historians.” He opposes art writing to art making, however, assuming that both the artwork and the text form a unit of discourse in art writing; they cannot be considered independently. David Carrier, *Artwriting* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 141. I use the term art writing to refer to the diverse forms of writings about art, including newspaper articles, catalog texts, artist statements, biographical accounts, and, in a wider sense, any recorded research into art history. See Marcus and Myers, “Traffic in Art and Culture.”

religious and caste affiliation.⁸² However, in the field of contemporary art, fine arts education institutions and artist-led organizations are responsible for knowledge transfer, thus effectively cutting across older social hierarchies based on religion and caste, a topic on which I will elaborate in chapter three. The artists gain access to novel resources (social, economic, and cultural capital) broadening their scope of action formerly limited by attributes preset by birth.

The spatial, disciplinary, and socio-cultural mobilities that artists engage in are the prerequisite for their cultural brokerage. Sometimes their brokerage is latent, for instance when their inclusive constitution crosscuts more traditional patterns of socio-cultural organization. Sometimes it is made manifest, for example, when they actively seek out different “sectorial publics” in art events, especially audiences that, due to their socio-economic background, have not been part of that field.⁸³

EMERGING CONTEMPORANEITY

I use the term emerging in relation to the contemporary art practice I observed in Nepal and Bangladesh. However, I do not want to imply that there have not been mobilities in these localities before; I want to emphasize the fact that through recent mobilities and motilities, artists actively engage multiple scales, including scales that have not previously been accessed by artists from Nepal and Bangladesh to this extent. “Emerging” also indicates a set of reflections—on art education, on the politics of representation, on national identity, on urbanization, and on the role of art in these processes—that have become a constitutive part of the young generation’s art practice. Looking at these contemporary practices through the lens of art as a connective and transgressive force allows me to map alternative notions of a multi-scalar contemporaneity that help relativize existing theories of the global contemporary.

In *Between Art and Anthropology*, Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright discuss the changing interrelations between anthropologists and their

82 *Mithila* is a form of art practiced primarily in the Mithila region of Bihar in India, and in the Tarai region of Nepal. The colorful, ornamental paintings are traditionally created by women on ceremonial occasions, especially marriages. Today however, *Mithila* contains a variety of scenes and motifs from daily life and is practiced by both men and women; artist S. C. Suman for instance is known for his contemporary interpretations of *Mithila*, which have been exhibited at the Siddhartha Art Gallery in Kathmandu four times since 2007. *Paubha* is a painting tradition practiced by the Newar caste of the Chitrakars in the Kathmandu valley. The religious paintings typically represent one central deity of the Buddhist/Hindu pantheon. In comparison to the *Thangka* tradition, which supposedly originated in Yarlung valley of central Tibet, and which is painted on silk cloth, *Paubha* is painted on cotton cloth. See “Mithila Cosmos IV: Kalpavriksha,” Catalog, S. C. Suman, accessed September 4, 2022, http://scsuman.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/mithila_cosmos_IV_Kalpavriksha.pdf; Madan Chitrakar, *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany* (Kathmandu: Teba-Chi (TBC) Studies Centre, 2012), 35, 40–41, 69.

83 Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum*.

research partners due to global flows of information, media, and capital.⁸⁴ They highlight the need to investigate the terms on which non-Western artists are made visible.⁸⁵ Although I agree that the terms of visibility are an important subject matter for anthropologists,⁸⁶ the scene they set is misleading. Their underlying premise is a rather settled Euro-American-centric art world with artists from the periphery crossing (or being crossed) in and out of this center.⁸⁷ Anthropology's role, so it would seem, is still to observe and mediate the terms of these entrances. This premise is an outcome of the history of differentiation of the fields of art history and art and anthropology.⁸⁸ It ties in with a narrative of globalization told almost exclusively from a Western perspective, in which the entrance of the Other into the field of cultural production has become a marker of change towards a new contemporary global art. Gerardo Mosquera poignantly summarizes this by arguing that the centers of the art world collect and categorize art from the periphery at will, and after "repackaging" it, take charge in "exhibiting the peripheries in the peripheries."⁸⁹ He concludes that this mechanism creates a divide between "curating cultures and curated cultures ... [which] provokes the art of the curated cultures to adapt in order to satisfy the preferences of the curating culture."⁹⁰ The formalization of two distinct blocks (self-other, West-non-West, center-periphery) not only fixes existing asymmetries, it also reduces art practitioners in the so-called periphery to mere imitators, compelled to reproduce a Western perspective on globalization and the art field. Expressions of the bias in this narrative vary from Okwui Enwezor's

84 Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, ed., *Between Art and Anthropology: Contemporary Ethnographic Practice* (Oxford: Berg, 2010).

85 Schneider and Wright, *Between Art and Anthropology*; Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum*, 3–5.

86 See for instance Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

87 The center/periphery binary is prevalently used to describe the relationship between what is perceived as a developed, modern metropolis and its less developed "other." As such, it has been central to the colonial, postcolonial, and development discourses. Liechty for instance refers to the paired term in order to describe the position of Nepal as the "always-becoming end of the global development spectrum." Mark Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu: Modernity on the Global Periphery* (Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2010), 4. The binary is often used as a spatial metaphor, in which the old colonial powers or "the West" are seen as the center, and the colonized or "the Global South" as the periphery.

88 The scope of this introduction does not allow me to adequately present the ongoing shifts in art history. A brief outline of the concepts of global art or global contemporary is nevertheless important here because the vocabulary and rhetoric used in the anthropology of art draw from this discourse. For a detailed genesis of global art history, and a valid critique notably of Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg's approaches, see Monica Juneja, "Global Art History and the 'Burden of Representation,'" in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting and Julia T. S. Binter (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011); Juneja, "Understanding Transculturalism."

89 Gerardo Mosquera, "Some Problems in Transcultural Curating," in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher and Rasheed Araeen (London: Kala Press, 1994), 135.

90 Mosquera, "Some Problems in Transcultural Curating," 135.

token role as “the first non-Western artistic director” of both *documenta 11* and the 56th *Venice Biennale*,⁹¹ to the celebration of the *Havana Biennale*'s success among the established biennale vanguards, to the reference to Jean-Hubert Martin's exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* (1989, Centre George Pompidou in Paris) as “the first event of global art.”⁹² The enumeration of these events as forerunners of a new global condition marks the Otherness of the actors involved, instead of taking their attempts at brokering this difference seriously. Anthropology, with its actor-centered approach is perfectly positioned to offer a nuanced, transcultural perspective on the scopes, motivations, and challenges of contemporary actors in the art field. However, it needs to overcome totalizing narratives of cultural globalization.

The idea of a global contemporary only supposedly marks a renegotiation of center and periphery. According to its main advocates, the concept emphasizes the interconnectedness of pluralized art worlds, and its world-encompassing quality aims at contesting the privilege of the Euro-American interpretative authority.⁹³ Hans Belting for instance, likens global art to the global worldwide net, explaining that it is omnipresent, yet not universal in content or message; it allows for free access to, and thus for a personal response to, the world.⁹⁴ There are positive outcomes of the “global art world” concept, such as the recognition of diversity and the emphasis on similarities between art practices throughout the world. But ideas of co-presence and synchronicity conceal asymmetries and reduce the complexity of translocal connections to a linear link between center and periphery. Monica Juneja has shown that advocates of the global contemporary fail to examine the qualities of relationalities in the “new geo-aesthetic” of globally networked artworlds; instead, they comprise the global contemporary as an “unproblematic dissolution of hierarchies.”⁹⁵ The potentiality of this totalizing geo-aesthetic theory to carry a diffusionist rhetoric and further hierarchizing mechanisms is best illustrated by the discourse on the proliferation of global forms.⁹⁶ Next to the “white cube,” the curator, the international workshop, and new mediums such as performance art, the large-scale art event has been claimed as one of the main effects of “the postcolonial conditions of the contemporary world.”⁹⁷ For Paul O'Neill temporary group exhibitions are crucial

91 Niru Ratnam, “Art and Globalisation,” in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, ed. Gillian Perry and Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 278.

92 Hans Belting, “Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate,” in Belting and Buddensieg, *Global Art World*, 58.

93 Belting and Buddensieg, *Global Art World*; Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary*; Bydler, *Global Art World*; Thomas Fillitz, “Anthropology and Discourses on Global Art.”

94 Belting, “Contemporary Art as Global Art,” 39–40.

95 Juneja, “A Very Civil Idea...,” 294.

96 See Hans Belting, “From World Art to Global Art: View on a New Panorama,” in Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary*; Bydler, *Global Art World*; Ratnam, “Art and Globalisation.”

97 Okwui Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 70–73.

tools for the mediation, experience, and historicization of contemporary art.⁹⁸ Charlotte Bydler calls the large-scale exhibition contemporary art's "flagship event."⁹⁹ The perennial repetition of events (hence the name biennial as shorthand for many formats) or the touring of exhibitions to different venues make the global contemporary framework durable. Individual events in distinct places are perceived as connected on a global map or in a global art calendar by a mobile art world composed of curators, collectors, and art critics.¹⁰⁰ However, the metaphors of the map and the calendar represent a bird's-eye perspective that brings more than 350 art events around the world into one field of vision.¹⁰¹ This field of vision may reflect synchronicity and co-presence on its surface, but its internal logic is hierarchical and historically tied to colonial expansion. Within the calendar, some events are more important than others: the *Venice Biennale* is considered the vantage point—the *grande dame*¹⁰² or the "ur-biennial"—for the global propagation of similar formats.¹⁰³ A narrative of replication follows the linear development of perennial exhibitions from a first wave of post-World War II events, such as the *São Paulo Biennale* (1951) or the *documenta* (1955), to the *Havana Biennale* (1984), and the significant increase of similar formats in the nineties.¹⁰⁴ This narrative often culminates in a perception of a "saturation" of the present art scene,¹⁰⁵ a veritable "biennial industry."¹⁰⁶ This perspective creates a global "canon of exhibitions" in relation to which every emerging event is seen and ordered.¹⁰⁷ Recently established or upcoming large-scale international exhibitions are appraised by their aim "to propagate a certain will to globality," i.e., their ambition to

98 Paul O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse," in *The Biennial Reader*, ed. Elena Filipovic, Solveig Øvstebø, and Marieke van Hal (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 242–243. O'Neill understands "group exhibitions" or "group shows" as any form of exhibition that is not a "monographic presentation," and that brings together multiple artists for one specific event, be it an exhibition, a festival, or a biennale.

99 Bydler, *Global Art World*, 244–245.

100 Bydler, *Global Art World*, 244–245; Samdani Art Foundation, ed., *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed. (Dhaka: Samdani Art Foundation, 2014).

101 The Biennale Foundation lists over 250 biennials, not including other formats, such as art fairs or summits. See "Directory of Biennials," Biennial Foundation, accessed February 05, 2023, <https://biennialfoundation.org/network/biennial-map/>.

102 Bydler, *Global Art World*, 100.

103 Caroline A. Jones, "Biennial Culture: A Longer History," in Filipovic, Øvstebø, and van Hal, *The Biennial Reader*, 69.

104 O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 242–243; Nikos Papastergiadis and Meredith Martin, "Art Biennales and Cities as Platforms for Global Dialogue," in *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, ed. Liana Giorgi, Monica Sassatelli, and Gerard Delanty (London: Routledge, 2011), 48–49; Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary*, 100–101.

105 Adele Tan, "Festivalizing Performance: Snapshots of an Alternative Circuit," in Belting and Binter, *Global Studies*, 120.

106 Bydler, *Global Art World*.

107 Lewis Biggs, "'Art, Money, Parties' and Liverpool Biennial," in *Art, Money, Parties: New Institutions in the Political Economy of Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 42.

tie in with a global contemporary discourse,¹⁰⁸ because, as O'Neill argues, "the periphery still has to follow the discourse of the center ... in search of legitimization."¹⁰⁹ This frame has become a rule of thumb for the analysis of large-scale art events and it overshadows and obscures the reference frames, motives, and counter-discourses intended by the organizers. It creates a totalizing frame that turns emerging art fields such as Nepal and Bangladesh into consumers of a global contemporaneity. Instead of using the global art world as a monolithic frame whose dominant form, the perennial festival, is consumed, negotiated, and incorporated locally, research needs to focus on artists as proactive producers and reflective analysts of the contemporary condition. This research should include investigating local motivations and meanings, power plays, and rhythms, and should be tied in with observations on national, regional, and global circuits.

I therefore propose an alternative understanding of contemporaneity on the basis of the translocal and multi-scalar positionings and practices of artists and their initiatives. Rather than looking at how space (whether as globalization or locality) affects artists, how it influences their artworks, and how this relation is perceived by curators, audiences, and critics, I look at how artists analyze, produce, and broker these spaces. How do they perceive and circumscribe their localities? What do they make visible and to what ends? In line with George E. Marcus, I argue for a closer collaboration and complicity between anthropologists and artists—to conceive of both as creative practitioners, who broker visual culture while being mobile and thereby break the sovereignty of the discourse they emerged from.¹¹⁰ Artists, like anthropologists, possess a sensitiveness for the fabric of life and how ongoing processes, such as urbanization, the consolidation of national identities, or the advance of digital media, affect it.

In her claim for an "ethnographic turn" in contemporary art scholarship, Fiona Siegenthaler brings attention to the ability of ethnography to follow mobile actors into diverse spaces; ethnography, especially based on participant observation, is free of the confinement of representational spaces and institutions.¹¹¹ She further argues that art, rather than concerning objects, is increasingly about practice and social relations, both core interests in the field of anthropology. This focus on practice highlights the agency of the artist (and other actors involved in the production of art) and recognizes these actors as active agents in shaping localities. There are several examples of scholars who focus on the agency of artists and their attempt to contest and reshape more hegemonic notions of space. Thomas Fillitz for instance focuses on artist biographies from the Ivory

108 Okwui Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form," in Filipovic, Øvstebø, and van Hal, *The Biennial Reader*, 438.

109 O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 258.

110 George E. Marcus, "Affinities: Fieldwork in Anthropology Today and the Ethnographic in Artwork," in Schneider and Wright, *Between Art and Anthropology*.

111 Fiona Siegenthaler, "Towards an Ethnographic Turn in Contemporary Art Scholarship," *Critical Arts* 27, no. 6 (2013).

Coast and Benin.¹¹² He demonstrates that these artists' artworks are visible manifestations of their physical and socio-cultural environment, as well as the meaning they ascribe to these environments. David Pinder traces the vital role of artists in developing critical approaches to the cultural geographies of urban spaces and cities, and in challenging the norms on how these spaces are represented.¹¹³ Christiane Brosius focuses on how artists, through their engagement with urban fabrics and societal change, bring forth alternative visions of the city in their art projects.¹¹⁴ Finally, Cathrine Bublatzky, in her ethnography of the international traveling exhibition *Indian Highway* (2008–2012), discusses power relations, the politics of representation, and the notion of "Indianness."¹¹⁵

(TRANS)LOCALITIES

In her conclusion to *The Anthropology of Globalization* reader, Anna Tsing emphasizes the importance of locality in anthropology: "culture, specificity, and place making" remain the discipline's area of expertise.¹¹⁶ Therefore, it is important to stay committed to locality, despite "the biggest world-making dreams and schemes."¹¹⁷ If anthropologists stay wary of the tropes of globalization theories, especially the perceived dichotomy between the global and the local, the discipline can make a valuable contribution to a nuanced and dynamic conception of contemporary geographies.¹¹⁸ Fourteen years after the publication of the reader, Alain Mueller ascertains a continued naturalization of a place–culture congruence and an underlying struggle "to bridge the gap between localized, situational inquiry, and the study of large-scale systems" in anthropology.¹¹⁹ Both appeals refer to persistent tropes in globalization studies: globalization has primarily been discussed in economic terms (as flows of capital and labor), whereas culture has played a marginal role. This has led to the assumption that economic globalization constitutes a cause for change, whereas shifts in culture are merely consequential.¹²⁰ Further, global and local continue to be conceived as opposites. This becomes most obvious in the use of local as a noun—as locality—thus

112 Thomas Fillitz, *Zeitgenössische Kunst aus Afrika: 14 Gegenwartskünstler aus Côte d'Ivoire und Bénin* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2002).

113 David Pinder, "Arts of Urban Exploration," *Cultural Geographies* 12, no. 4 (2005).

114 Christiane Brosius, "Emplacing and Excavating the City: Art, Ecology and Public Space in New Delhi," *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015).

115 Cathrine Bublatzky, *Along the Indian Highway: An Ethnography of an International Travelling Exhibition* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2020).

116 Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," 464.

117 Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," 472.

118 Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," 464, 467.

119 Alain Mueller, "Beyond Ethnographic Scriptocentrism: Modelling Multi-Scalar Processes, Networks, and Relationships," *Anthropological Theory* 16, no. 1 (2016): 103.

120 Lydia Hausteil, *Global Icons: Globale Bildinszenierung und kulturelle Identität* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2008), 145–146; Ratnam, "Art and Globalisation," 287.

grammatically describing a situation or a place, and global as globalization to mark its processual, deterritorialized, and fluid nature. Global thus comes to connote a “transcending of place,” while local is marked as a “making of places.”¹²¹ Because the scholarly engagement with culture remains attached to a conception of territorialized locality, it is not surprising that cultural shifts are seen as a consequence of (economic) globalization. Locality or local culture (as territorially fixed) is conceived as the context in which the global (as fluid formations, global flows) is consumed, negotiated, and incorporated.¹²² The effects of these tropes are visible in the “contextualizing practice” of the global contemporary frame, which fixes localities of large-scale art events around the world in place; they become particular versions of what is perceived as a globally transportable format.¹²³ Events, whether the *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* or the *Yinchuan Biennale* in China, are encased as temporary and locally organized events that connect to global networks.¹²⁴ Dhaka for instance is on the calendar of the global art world for a few days every two years when the *DAS* takes place, and the capital city becomes the context in which the global format of the biennale is temporarily fixed. This makes events comparable not only against the form, but also against other local implementations.

The global–local divide is accompanied by a hierarchizing practice between localities: throughout my research, I was confronted with conceptions of Nepal and Bangladesh as objects of developmentalist intervention, and victims of natural catastrophes and political instability. Mark Liechty refers to a “standard preface” in many official portrayals of Nepal as a “poor, landlocked, and under-developed nation.” He follows by asserting that, “even Bangladesh, the poster child of Asian poverty,” is more fortunate.¹²⁵ Nepal was closed to foreigners, including researchers, from the beginning of the Shah rule in 1768 until the abolition of the Rana regime in 1951.¹²⁶ This remoteness additionally fostered the notion of a *terra incognita*¹²⁷ and Nepal became known as a “beautiful and relatively unspoiled country.”¹²⁸ Gérard Toffin claims that “Nepal has become the

121 Tsing, “Conclusion: The Global Situation,” 464.

122 Tsing, “Conclusion: The Global Situation,” 464.

123 Jeremy Valentine, “Art and Empire: Aesthetic Autonomy, Organisational Mediation and Contextualising Practices,” in Harris, *Art, Money, Parties*, 209.

124 O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn,” 244.

125 Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in Kathmandu* (Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2008), 39.

126 Ram B. Chhetri, “Anthropology in Nepal: A Short History of Research, Teaching and Practice,” in *Anthropology and Sociology of Nepal: Taking Stock of Teaching, Research, and Practice*, ed. Ram B. Chhetri, Tushi R. Pandey, and L.P. Uprety (Kathmandu: Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, 2010), 2.

127 Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, ed., *Contributions to the Anthropology of Nepal: Proceedings of a Symposium Held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, June / July 1973* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1974), 1.

128 Gerald Berreman, “Himalayan Anthropology: What, Wither, and Weather,” in *Himalayan Anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan Interface*, ed. James F. Fisher (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 70.

land of the 'last': the last shamans, the last transhumant shepherds, the last Hindu kingdom, the last example of Indian Buddhism in the world."¹²⁹ These labels have marked Nepal as "not modern" and "not developed," and have thereby repeatedly Othered its people. Despite Liechty's propitious note, Bangladesh is struggling with a similar image problem. The 2016 *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh* starts with a comparable "standard preface": "Once described as a 'test case for development,' the country has achieved significant social and economic progress in the past decades."¹³⁰ This is followed by a list of all the challenges Bangladesh is currently facing (from a high population density to underdeveloped infrastructure), despite which it has managed "positive developments." These portrayals of Nepal and Bangladesh as periphery—as objects of developmentalist intervention—have a significant influence on the type of research supported and conducted in these countries. According to the German Project Information System (GEPRIS), the overwhelming majority of the thirty research projects funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and carried out in Bangladesh in 2018 are on environmental change, pollution, megacities, water, and the textile industry. The majority of the sixty-nine projects funded on Nepal are related to religion or ritual, natural catastrophes, and environmental and political change.¹³¹ Throughout my research, I frequently had to defend why I was looking at contemporary art, rather than at issues of development, religion, or the environment.

THE REGION/THE NATION

Underlying these classifying and hierarchizing tropes is a historically grown academic scholarship that continues to determine the kind of research being done by regulating the subdivision of institutional areas of focus and the attribution of funding. This sectioning is in crucial need of theoretical rethinking, and the transgressive and translatory qualities of the cultural production by artists working in and on Nepal and Bangladesh present a strong case study from which to continue this rethinking started by transcultural studies.

The national circumscriptions of locality in South Asia are largely subsumed—and marginalized—within a wider academic focus on the region or the area. Area studies, as the specific fields of scholarship that emerged notably in North America after World War II, have been subject to much

129 Gérard Toffin, *Imagination and Realities: Nepal Between Past and Present* (New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2016), 47–48.

130 Ali Riaz and Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman, "Introduction," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, ed. Ali Riaz and Mohammad S. Rahman (London: Routledge, 2016), 1.

131 See "GEPRIS – Geförderte Projekte der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft," GEPRIS, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, accessed August 27, 2018, <http://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/OCTOPUS>. In comparison, in 2018, there were 333 projects funded on India, and 3763 on Germany.

critique in the past three decades.¹³² Willem van Schendel criticized the common understanding of areas as internally consistent and territorially bounded geographical units as one of the academic tradition's main predicaments.¹³³ He argues that areas are not only sites of knowledge production that lead to "transnational scholarly lineages, circles of referencing, or structures of authority" but also produce "geographies of ignorance."¹³⁴ These studies do not produce "true area specialists," but experts of sub-regions who present their findings as representations of an imagined socio-cultural and political areal essence.¹³⁵

South Asia is physically bound by its seemingly natural demarcation as a subcontinent, it reflects the extension of the British colonial sphere, it is constructed on the basis of mid-twentieth century states, and thus lends itself to be comprised as a region.¹³⁶ This regional coherence is reinforced by the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which fosters economic and cultural cooperation among its member states. Since its establishment as an academic area, South Asia has shaped the scientific landscape through the formation of institutes (like the Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge 1964 or the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University 1962), publications (e.g., *Journal of South Asian Studies*, published since 1971 under the authority of the South Asian Studies Association of Australia), and regular international conferences.¹³⁷ Although the region commonly circumscribes eight countries, India plays the role of central court in this academic field: most of the research in and on South Asia focuses on India and sub-regional scholars present their findings as *partes pro toto*. In other words, India has come to stand for South Asia and other countries like Nepal and Bangladesh are

132 The critique of "area studies" has produced ample literature across the humanities and social sciences. A cohesive discussion of the respective positions is beyond the scope of this book. In the following, I direct my focus to the critical reflections of Willem van Schendel and Sara Shneiderman as I feel they are most relevant for my research. Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing"; Sara Shneiderman, "Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia? Some Scholarly and Political Considerations Across Time and Space," *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 2 (2010). For a systematic analysis of the challenges and opportunities of area studies today, refer to Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge, ed., *Area Studies at the Crossroads: Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). See also Shane J. Barter, "Area Studies, Asian Studies, and the Pacific Basin," *Geographical Review* 105, no. 1 (2015); Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Anti-Area Studies," *Communal / Plural* 8, no. 1 (2000); James D. Sidaway, "Geography, Globalization, and the Problematic of Area Studies," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 4 (2013).

133 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 650.

134 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 654.

135 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 657–658.

136 Toffin, *Imagination and Realities*, 30; Sinderpal Singh, *Framing "South Asia": Whose Imagined Region?* (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2002); van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 655.

137 See Jackie Assayag and Véronique Bénéï, ed., *Remapping Knowledge: The Making of South Asian Studies in India, Europe and America, 19th–20th Centuries* (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, 2005).

restrained in an academic periphery.¹³⁸ India's dominant position has further caused a thematic deadlock. Based on the research interests of Indologists and scholars of Islamic and Buddhist studies, who continue to play a decisive role in the field, the region is sectioned according to religious and language commonalities.¹³⁹ Consequently, research on Bangladesh often takes place either within the framework of "Muslim South Asia" or within the wider setting of the region of Bengal shaped primarily by Hinduism. In the former, it is often subsumed into Pakistan, of which its territory was part from 1947–1971.¹⁴⁰ In the latter, it is marginal to India, of which it was part before 1947.¹⁴¹

Nepal's treatment as "something of a backwater in South Asian studies" is most likely the result of a conscious disregard of the country's political histories.¹⁴² By denying the role of colonialism—and thus also postcolonial discourse—in Nepal, the country and its inhabitants are seemingly stuck in a scholarly induced "historical and political vacuum."¹⁴³ Accordingly, Nepal is often included in Himalayan studies with a focus on its highland regions. Its southern lowlands (*Tarai*) are overlooked.¹⁴⁴ This neglect is extremely problematic as it feeds into current debates of national identity, such as the claim for recognition (and/or ethnic and territorial autonomy) by the Madhesi people in this region.¹⁴⁵ These debates result from the end of the civil war in Nepal (1996–2006), the abolishment of the monarchy in 2005, and thus the end of the Hindu kingdom. These events brought forth a slow but charged dismantling of Nepali nationalism.¹⁴⁶ During the past fifteen years, notably in the process of writing the new Constitution, Nepal has seen an intense and violent negotiation of its new democratic and republican national identity, which—based on Hindu religion, Hindu monarchy,

138 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 650, 657–658.

139 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 657.

140 For instance, Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

141 For instance, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

142 Mary Des Chene, "Is Nepal in South Asia? The Condition of Non-Postcoloniality," *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 12, no. 2 (2007): 218.

143 Shneiderman, "Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia?" 295–296.

144 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing"; Shneiderman, "Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia?"

145 The term *Tarai* refers to the fertile lowlands located between the Himalayan foothills and the Indo-Gangetic alluvial plane. Madhesi originally circumscribed the inhabitants of the Tarai. Madhes, synonymous with Tarai, was under the control of the Mughal emperors and British East India Company. After Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquest (mid-eighteenth century), this territory was integrated into the newly unified Nepal. In the course of the last century, the denomination Madhesi shifted from a primarily geographical to an ethnic meaning. Today, the term refers to an ethnic community (or a group of ethnic communities) defined notably in close relation to India and in opposition to the hill regions of Nepal. Commonalities of dress (most notably the *dhoti*), caste composition, language, and food preferences are the most visible attributes of this common identity. Kalpana Jha, *The Madhesi Upsurge and the Contested Idea of Nepal* (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 38–39, 71.

146 Jha, *Madhesi Upsurge*, 1.

and the Nepali language—was used to forcefully (and violently) unite the country after Prithivi Narayan Shah's mid-eighteenth-century conquest. Citizens, politicians, and members of the civil society are engaged in a continuous struggle to bring together more than ten religions, 125 ethnic groups/castes, and 123 languages divided across three vastly different geographical zones: high Himalayan Mountains, mid-range hills, and lowland Tarai.¹⁴⁷ That 50.27% of the total population of Nepal live in the Tarai region, while only 6.73% live in the high mountains, points to the problematic of a Himalayan-centered approach.¹⁴⁸

Besides being geographically determined, academically grown circumscriptions often emphasize cultural commonalities. Hence, even while trying to transgress the nation-state as the sole regulatory agent (and focus on the wider region instead), area studies maintain a territorially cohesive notion of culture. Sara Shneiderman for instance focuses on Tibeto-Burman speech communities, Buddhism and Hinduism as “powerful shaping forces,” rice cultivation, and trans-regional trade as socio-economic and cultural commonalities in the highland Himalayas.¹⁴⁹ Such categorizations not only foster exclusive notions of belonging, but often also preclude a joint analysis of localities that do not fit these criteria, such as Nepal and Bangladesh. Religiously, Bangladesh is recognized as a Muslim-majority country (90.4%), with Hindus (8.5%), Buddhists (< 1%), and Christians (< 1%) as its main minorities.¹⁵⁰ Due to the importance of the Bengali language in the struggle for independence—Bangladesh literally means “the country of Bengali speakers”—Bengali remains unchallenged as main language.¹⁵¹ Together, these two indicators lead to a perception of Bangladesh as a rather culturally homogenous nation, ignoring that this apparent unity is the result of a well-crafted academic and political hegemony.

My research is firmly rooted within transcultural studies, allowing me to retrace, critically reflect, and eventually transgress these academic (South Asian Studies, Himalayan Studies) and political (Nepali nationalism, and Bengali or Bangladeshi nationalism) dissections. The superposition of culture and territory has lasting effects on how different nations and their citizens are portrayed. Scholars, politicians, journalists, and artists alike often perceive borders as defining (and to a certain extent confining) culture. This is as clear from the two separate bodies of literature for research on Nepal and Bangladesh—each situated in its own academic lineages and circles of referencing—as it is from preconceived naturalized

147 See Jha, *Madhesi Upsurge*, 2–3. Depending on the circumscription, nineteen to twenty-eight percent of those are Madhesi.

148 Central Bureau of Statistics, *2015 Statistical Year Book Nepal* (Kathmandu: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016), xi–xii, accessed September 1, 2022, <https://nepalindata.com/resource/STATISTICAL-YEAR-BOOK-NEPAL-2015/>.

149 Shneiderman, “Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia?” 294.

150 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, “Population & Housing Census 2011: National Volume 3: Urban Area Report,” unpublished manuscript, last modified August 2014, accessed June 19, 2021, PDF file, <https://bit.ly/2O1dhJR>.

151 Van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing,” 32–33.

(Nepal is mountainous, Bangladesh is flat) or cultural (Bangladeshis are Muslim, Nepalis are Hindu or Buddhist) communalities. Instead of presuming established communalities, the transcultural perspective allows me to examine which values and practices actually foster contact. Which understanding of contemporary art, which formats and mediums, which visions are shared, critically discussed, and tested between artists from Nepal and Bangladesh? This is not to say that there are no borders—that knowledge, ideas, and practices are flowing freely—but that these borders are dynamically “performed, acted, and discussed.”¹⁵² The historical units and boundaries drawn by scholarship and the entangled political claims over territory are not as fixed and refined as they appear. Focusing on the spatial and cultural displacements of peoples, ideas, and objects reveals the constant making and remaking of such boundaries and circumscriptions of localities.¹⁵³ Translocality, with its emphasis in *transgression* and *transformation*, is a more specific tool to look at the (re)creation of local distinctions, instead of playing them against each other.¹⁵⁴ It de-essentializes the notion of the local and uses it as an analytical tool, looked at from the perspective of spatial movements.¹⁵⁵ It emphasizes the interlinkages and transgressions of different localities on diverse scales beyond the national and regional—for instance between Dhaka and Kathmandu, or between Kathmandu and its hinterland. But it also draws attention to asymmetries, to blocked or contested flows. When are artists or ideas not free to move? Are there mechanisms in place to prevent such movement? By whom were they established and to what end?

THE CITY

Most of my research partners live and work in the city. They interact with its art-specific and its more general infrastructure on a daily basis, but they also proactively use the city as a creative space. Through their artworks and projects, they address issues of urbanization, environmental pollution, or the preservation of heritage and thus claim the right to co-determine the city as locality. Like the region, the city has been subject to academic delimitation and sectioning. Jennifer Robinson sees one explanation in the West’s strategy to establish itself as modern, as opposed to “others” and “elsewheres” that are conceived as “not modern.”¹⁵⁶ Her understanding of modernity as “valorisation and celebration of innovation and novelty” calls for a rejection of old, traditional materials, beliefs, and practices. Her notion of development is led by an aspiration to better life in the city for which

152 Abu-Er-Rub et al., “Introduction: Engaging Transculturality,” xxvi.

153 Juneja, “Understanding Transculturalism,” 28–29.

154 Freitag and von Oppen, “Introduction”; see Brickell and Datta, *Translocal Geographies*; Greiner, “Patterns of Translocality.”

155 Freitag and von Oppen, “Introduction,” 9.

156 Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (London: Routledge, 2006), 4.

reason certain cultural practices (considered un-modern or un-innovative) need to disappear.¹⁵⁷ The hierarchization resulting from this strategy led to the perception of many Euro-American cities as innovative and creative, while others have been marked as elsewhere. For decades, the capital city of Bangladesh has been identified by a lack of proper planning and safety: density, traffic chaos, the smell of burning trash, and “slumization” mark its portrayal as megacity by national and international media, NGOs, development agencies, and often also the city’s inhabitants.¹⁵⁸ Kathmandu’s rapid urbanization in the aftermath of the civil war and the ongoing rural-to-urban migration make it vulnerable to a similar rhetoric. Thomas Bell for instance provides a list, reaching from “planning failures” to “the shit in the river,” of Kathmandu’s modern environmental disasters.¹⁵⁹ The depiction of cities as sites of “desolate placelessness”¹⁶⁰ or “disenchanted worlds”¹⁶¹ is part of a wider trope of “dividing, categorising and assuming hierarchical relations”¹⁶² prevalent in urban studies in the past few decades. It is apparent in the terms “megacities” and “global cities” for instance.¹⁶³ On the one hand, wealthy global cities are qualified by success and the achievement of modernity. On the other hand, poor megacities are characterized by things they lack. This global–megacity divide represents a Western-centric viewpoint, which “stress[es] specialisation and sectoral clustering as the basis for creativity and innovation,” leaving many cities outside the West with rather pessimistic growth prognoses.¹⁶⁴ This mirrors Roberta Comunion’s more specific critique of the “creative cities” discourse.¹⁶⁵ She traces this

157 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 4; Jennifer Robinson, “Cities in a World of Cities: The Comparative Gesture,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35, no. 1 (2011): 3.

158 See Ananya Roy, “Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35, no. 2 (2011): 224. Roy explains how slums have become one of the biggest identifiers for the Third World or megacities. For examples of similar portrayals of Dhaka, see Erik German and Solana Pyn, “Dhaka: Fastest Growing Megacity in the World,” *Global Post*, September 8, 2010, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://theworld.org/stories/2010-09-08/dhaka-fastest-growing-megacity-world>; Habibul H. Khondker, “Dhaka: Megacity of Despair,” *Global Dialogue*, November 29, 2010, accessed September 7, 2022, <https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/dhaka-megacity-of-despair>. According to the most recent census (2011) in Bangladesh, 8,906,039 out of a total population of 144,043,697 live in Dhaka Metropolitan City. This amounts to a density of 28,185 people per square kilometer. See Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, “Population & Housing Census 2011.”

159 Thomas Bell, *Kathmandu* (Gurgaon: Random House India 2015 [2014]), 275.

160 John Friedmann, “Place and Place-Making in Cities: A Global Perspective,” *Planning Theory & Practice* 11, no. 2 (2010): 150.

161 Max Weber, quoted in Toffin, *Imagination and Realities*, 96.

162 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 2; see also Neil Brenner, “Stereotypes, Archetypes, and Prototypes: Three Uses of Superlatives in Contemporary Urban Studies,” *City and Community* 2, no. 3 (2003).

163 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 4–5.

164 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 11.

165 Roberta Comunion, “Rethinking the Creative City: The Role of Complexity, Networks and Interactions in the Urban Creative Economy,” *Urban Studies* 48, no. 6 (2011): 1158.

understanding of creativity—as innovative practice, as tool for economic development, and as image branding—back to the *European Capital of Culture* concept. One of the latest and most prominent applications of this concept is Richard Florida's circumscription of the "creative class" which highlights the main problem of this discourse:¹⁶⁶ creativity, understood as the marketable and sellable production of "meaningful new forms"—as a tool for economic development—has the potential to serve as a hierarchizing category, declaring certain cities, or certain areas in the city, more creative than others.¹⁶⁷

What is needed is a more subtle approach to creative interventions and the city as a locality—an analysis that goes beyond the identification and description of Dhaka (and possibly Kathmandu) as failed megacities in contrast to economically viable, creative global cities. This is especially important since many of the artists I worked with have an ambiguous relation to the city. On the one hand, many of my case studies show the city, its intensity, the close contact to like-minded artists, and the proximity of the art infrastructure as creatively invigorating. On the other hand, the social immediacy of neighbors, family members, and colleagues, paired with traffic jams and air pollution, can also be suffocating. This ambiguity offers an incentive to reconsider tropes of development, modernity, and globalization, and to approach the city as a more dynamically constituted locality. For me, locality means the lived experience and perception of a place in space and time; it is the frame that I set for my analysis of specific situations. This can be a living room, a building, a neighborhood, or an area in, or even a whole, city. For the people I write about, locality can have a similarly diverse set of meanings, depending on what their ambition and scope of action is. This implies that the meaning of locality is always dependent upon the perspective of the respective onlooker, and thus needs to be (re)analyzed for each situation. The concept of translocality allows me to take the contemporary artists' claim to shape, represent, and mediate the various scales of locality in which they dwell and operate seriously. Their proactive engagement with the city urges me to scrutinize geographically and culturally cohesive ascriptions of areas, to overcome oversimplified hierarchical classifications of cities, and to question top-down, generalizing frames of globalization. Translocality is an intermediary concept that allows the analysis of connections beyond the dichotomy of what is usually considered local and global. It recognizes the local, in this case the city, as more than "a place where globalization is experienced by social actors."¹⁶⁸ The city is only one node in an invisible network of localities in which contemporaneity emerges. The prefix "trans" does not necessarily refer to geographical space, it also marks the importance of the time factor: not

166 Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*; Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class."

167 Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class," 293–294.

168 Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta, "Introduction: Translocal Geographies," in *Translocal Geographies: Spaces, Places, Connections*, ed. Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 5.

all mobility happens at the same pace. Sometimes rhythms change from one neighborhood to another depending for instance on the infrastructure available; in Dhaka travelling by foot on smaller roads can be faster than travelling on large but congested main traffic axes. This pace changes the way people experience these spaces. Similarly, moments of immobility may only be perceived as such from within, but with distance may reveal great changes.¹⁶⁹ Translocality sharpens the mind for the identification of socio-economic asymmetries, but it does not presuppose hierarchies between different scales or places based on these asymmetries. Therefore, it allows me to see not only all cities,¹⁷⁰ but all localities, as autonomous and creative. Nevertheless, this autonomy remains related to connectedness: localities cannot be studied as self-contained units, as microcosms from within which all things can be explained.¹⁷¹ They, their inhabitants, conceptions, and representations, are always connected to those of other localities. Here the notion of scale, and complementary to it, network, is crucial.

My understanding of scale is based on Biao Xiang's definition as "the spatial reach of the actions."¹⁷² His notion of the emergent scale, "the scope of coordination and mobilization that arises from collective actions which in turn generates new capacity for the actors," alludes to the mobility and reach of collaborative action at the center of my research.¹⁷³ Xiang recognizes that actions taken on or directed towards different scales follow different logics and patterns. These actions use different tools and touch different discourses. Scale is thus, in his understanding, not a geographical unit, but an analytical abstraction to grasp individual and collective strategies and processes of social change.¹⁷⁴ Anna Tsing proposes a similar application of scale as a tool for an informed investigation of globalization processes:

First, I would pay close attention to ideologies of scale, that is, cultural claims about locality, regionality, and globality; about stasis and circulation; and about networks and strategies of proliferation. I would track rhetorics of scale as well as contests over what will count as relevant scales. Second, I would break down the units of culture and political economy through which we make sense of events and social processes. Instead of looking for world-wrapping evolutionary stages, logics, and epistemes, I would begin by finding what I call "projects," that is, relatively coherent bundles of ideas and practices as realized in particular times and places. The choice of what counts as a project depends on what one is trying to learn

169 Brickell and Datta, "Introduction," 9–10.

170 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

171 Freitag and von Oppen, "Introduction," 6.

172 Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography," 284, 290.

173 Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography," 284–285.

174 Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography," 284–285.

about, but, in each case, to identify projects is to maintain a commitment to localization, even of the biggest world-making dreams and schemes.¹⁷⁵

This investigation, Tsing suggests, takes into account the “ideologies of scale”—that is, the cultural claims and rhetorics employed in the use of spatial vocabulary—and approaches these in relation to specific projects. Scale is thus an abstraction of social actions, a tool to scrutinize the different claims, rhetorics, motivations, logics, and strategies of actors in relation to different localities. What do artists, festival organizers, and institutions mean when they want to establish something “on the global map,” or when they want to address the local community? What claims do researchers, including myself, make when we present a practice, a belief, or an action as global?

NETWORKS

A translocal perspective usually requires multi-sited fieldwork or ... mobile fieldwork.¹⁷⁶

The rethinking of the anthropological and art historical approaches to contemporary art from the perspective of transculturality requires a complementary use of theory and method. My approach is based on the foregrounding of actors and their practices; by following my research partners’ movements in and through different scales of locality, I am compelled to repeatedly reconsider my own conception of existing research frames and contexts. Complementary to scale, I use network as a tool to grasp the multitude of connections that bind collectives, artists, artworks, ideas, knowledge, and localities on different scales within the fields of practice of contemporary art, and with other fields. It is a methodological tool I adopted during my fieldwork to follow the notion of contemporary art, as well as an abstracted image of the social, spatial, and ideological entanglements that I encountered.

The notion of the network is one of the most widely employed tools to approach the analysis of connections.¹⁷⁷ Its application has generated

175 Tsing, “Conclusion: The Global Situation,” 472.

176 Freitag and von Oppen, “Introduction” 19.

177 Clyde Mitchell is one of the first anthropologists to use the concept of networks as an analytical tool. He bases his definition of networks on Katz’s statement that networks are “the set of persons who can get in touch with each other.” In opposition to Katz however, Mitchell argues that the common use of the word “network” is better grasped by focusing on the connections, rather than the people who are connected by them. The “network” then is a “set of linkages among persons and contacts.” He elaborates that the contributors to his edited volume define “a social network [as] a net in which there are no loops but in which the arcs may be given values. In other words, it is thought of as being finite, but there may be several links in either direction between the persons in the network and these links may be accorded different qualities or values.”

an array of different, sometimes antagonistic *modes d'emploi*. The social network analysis (SNL), which grew from the 1930s to the 1950s out of the popularity of network as an analytical concept, is a structural approach based on the study of interaction between social actors.¹⁷⁸ Relations are seen as expressions of the connections between different agents, they consist "of a body of qualitative measures of network structure."¹⁷⁹ SNL's most renowned antagonist is the actor-network theory (ANT) developed in the framework of Science and Technology Studies (STS) by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law, among others.¹⁸⁰ Despite its name, Latour comprehends ANT as a tool, rather than a full-blown theory, for observing and describing things.¹⁸¹ Both ANT and SNA grew out of very distinct scientific needs and thus speak to disparate scientific communities. However, anthropology has always been at the crossroads between the two, no doubt because both approaches, no matter their different *modes d'emploi*, represent attempts to reconcile localized, situational inquiry with an analysis of large-scale systems. This attempt constitutes a valid reason to continue working with the knowledge both fields have generated. Rather than seeing localized inquiry and the study of large-scale systems as antagonistic research foci in need of reconciliation, I propose, both should be considered different scales within a network. The knowledge generated from SNL and ANT, combined with the notion of scale, offers ways to rethink multi-sited ethnography from a transcultural perspective by accounting for different scopes of action, emerging mobilities, and sites of research.

J. Clyde Mitchell, "The Concept and Use of Social Networks," in *Social Networks in Urban Situations: Analyses of Personal Relationship in Central African Towns*, ed. J. Clyde Mitchell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969), 4–5; Fred E. Katz, "Social Participation and Social Structure," *Social Forces* 45, no. 2 (1966): 203. For a comprehensive overview of the development and history of network analysis in the social sciences, see Linton Freeman, *The Development of Social Network Analysis: A Study in the Sociology of Science* (Vancouver: Empirical Press, 2011).

178 Freeman, *The Development of Social Network Analysis*, 2.

179 John Scott and Peter J. Carrington, ed., *The SAGE Handbook of Social Network Analysis* (London: Sage, 2011), 3–4.

180 Lilla Vicssek, Gábor Király, and Hanna Kónya, "Networks in the Social Sciences: Comparing Actor-Network Theory and Social Network Analysis," *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 7, no. 2 (2016): 78.

181 In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour emphasizes that a "network is a concept, not a thing out there. It is a tool to help describe something, not what is being described." In sum, he retains three earlier features of "networks" and adds a fourth: he specifies that (a) a point-to-point connection is being established which is physically traceable and thus can be recorded empirically; (b) such a connection leaves empty most of what is not connected. (c) It is not made "for free," but requires work; (d) a network is not made of nylon thread, words, or any durable substance but is the trace left behind by some moving agent. It has to be traced anew by the passage of another vehicle, another circulating entity. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996); Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 128, 131–132.

The development of multi-sited ethnography resulted from the renegotiation of spatial relations, brought on by an interest in theories of globalization. It was also an answer to practical issues of a changing field; actors became more mobile (anthropological interest in migration and diaspora) and locales became too big to measure on foot (anthropological interest in cities). In this sense, multi-sited ethnography represented a break with the conventional understanding of fieldwork as a long-term stay in one particular locality. Instead, it offered a "revival of a sophisticated practice of constructivism."¹⁸² As a technique of construction, Marcus proposed "tracing," by which he meant a "following," of people, of things, of metaphors, of stories, of biographies, or of conflicts from the analyzed community's point of view, to different sites of research.¹⁸³ Since Marcus' initial outline, many scholars have tried to refine the method, often by either reaffirming the importance of in-depth localized research, or by emphasizing the importance of flows¹⁸⁴ and in-between spaces.¹⁸⁵ Mark-Anthony Falzon for instance maintained that perhaps the lack of depth or "thickness" in multi-sited ethnography managed to capture the way people themselves experience contemporary life best,¹⁸⁶ and that "understanding the shallow" could produce depth. Appadurai declared the need for a "transnational anthropology" that would study the dynamics of "deterritorialization."¹⁸⁷ Later, he added a focus on localities as a "product of incessant effort" and as "temporary negotiations" produced by the circulation of forms and the work of imagination.¹⁸⁸ Even though Falzon and Appadurai raised valid points about multi-sitedness, their writings only reinforced the antagonistic use of situated localities or sites, and the deterritorialized, transcendental space of global flows (i.e., globalization). Further, the majority of researchers have failed to open the black boxes that constitute transnational connections and global flows.¹⁸⁹

182 George E. Marcus, "Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (October 1995): 105.

183 Marcus, "Ethnography In/Of the World System," 105.

184 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 49.

185 Ulf Hannerz, "Transnational Research," in *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, ed. H. Russel Bernard (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1998), 247.

186 Mark-Anthony Falzon, "Introduction: Multi-Sited Ethnography: Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research," in *Multi-Sited Ethnography: Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research*, ed. Mark-Anthony Falzon (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 9.

187 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 49.

188 Arjun Appadurai, "How Histories Make Geographies: Circulation and Context in a Global Perspective," *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 10, 12.

189 Mueller, "Beyond Ethnographic Scriptocentrism," 103; based on Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, "Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macrostructure Reality, and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So," in *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Toward an Integration of Micro- and Macro-Sociologies*, ed. Karin Knorr-Cetina and Aaron V. Cicourel (Boston: Routledge, 1981).

Alain Mueller's solution to this impasse is a shift in perspective that gives equal weight to the local and to circulations through the notion of the network:

Accounting for the multi-scalar cluster of relations, which the proposed model was intended to represent, required engaging in ethnographic work at its "local" nodal points. In other words, it meant "situationalizing" flows and ceasing to see them as transcendental spaces. ... The two dimensions of my network model—the interconnectedness of all interactions, and the situatedness of all connections—when understood through their mutual and recursive relations encourage the analyst to give equal weight to "local" situations *and* to circulation, by acknowledging that neither of these dimensions can exist without the other: they are inextricable and inseparable.¹⁹⁰

Mueller argues for a methodological situationalizing of flows and a recognition of the "interconnectedness of all interactions."¹⁹¹ His own course of action is twofold, consisting of a multiplication of sites of inquiry and the adoption of a polymorphic research approach. Unfortunately, Mueller's article was published in 2016, too late to have had an effect on my initial methodological conception. Yet, his research focus on the music-based youth subculture of hardcore punk was marked by similar increased mobilities, multiple scales of interactions, and translocal interconnections as those I observed during my explorative fieldwork in Nepal and Bangladesh (August–October 2013). My recognition of the "interconnectedness of all interactions" and the "situatedness of all connections" derived from my attempt to adapt ideas from network theories to a translocal perspective, as well as from my aim to offer an alternative notion of multi-scalar contemporaneity through the artists' negotiations of locality in their artworks and initiatives. The network I trace is not a fixed model, but an abstracted image of the complexity of social, material, and geographical relations I observed at a particular moment and from a particular perspective. Rather than spanning taxonomical space, like a map or a grid, the network takes the shape of a matrix that can be made to operate on different scales. Networks are not "things-out-there";¹⁹² they are a methodological tool that helps me grasp and visualize my field of research. Unlike the field which relates actors to existing social structures, markets, and specific art infrastructures, the network is an artificial matrix which for the purpose of this book comprises

190 Mueller, "Beyond Ethnographic Scriptocentrism," 110.

191 Mueller, "Beyond Ethnographic Scriptocentrism," 110; see also Andreas Hepp, "Translocal Media Cultures: Networks of the Media and Globalization," in *Connectivity, Networks and Flows: Conceptualizing Contemporary Communications*, ed. Andreas Hepp, Friedrich Krotz, Shaun Moores, and Carsten Winter (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2008), 40.

192 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 131.

all these elements. It is dynamic, unbound, and processual, and can only be grasped through the different claims, rhetorics, motivations, and strategies in relation to the spatial terminology that actors within the field employ or to which they refer. Similar to Mueller's strategy, this led me to multiply my research sites in terms of geographical expansion and scale, and to explore methods beyond the more traditionally ethnographic tools.

Due to increased mobility, the anthropologist's presence is no longer limited to physical face-to-face inquiry and direct observation in the field; anthropologists can now draw information from online activities, contact people via e-mail, and check in on Facebook.¹⁹³ More than increased mobility or decreased physical distance, this is about a different kind of rapprochement. Working with urban, mostly middle class, university-educated, contemporary artists meant working with people who use the same communication channels that I do. These are people who have access to the same movies, who consume similar foods, and very often participate in the same discourses. It is important to acknowledge these similarities because they facilitated my entrance into people's lives, they defined my choice of methodology, and they influenced the manner and intensity of the relationships I formed. It is as important to recognize existing asymmetries. One of the most important asymmetries is my privileged access to economic and informational resources through my affiliation with a German university and its well-appointed library. It is by means of this privilege that my research began. In the frame of a class on contemporary art, I visited the first Bangladesh pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* in 2011.¹⁹⁴ Through Britto, the main force behind this pavilion, I became interested in the contemporary art field in South Asia. Facebook pages, blogs, and internet presence led me to artist collectives, activities, and their interconnections. The internet became an important site of research and it remained so throughout the data collection, processing, and compilation period. In my offline research, I followed artists connected with Britto to Chittagong, Rajshahi, and Narayanganj. Due to my timeframe, the frequent nation-wide *hartals* (general strike) preventing long distance travelling, and the density of events in Dhaka, I spent the majority of my fieldwork (five months between 2014 and 2016) in the capital city. Nepal's contemporary artistic field (artists and art infrastructure, from education institutions to exhibition spaces) is concentrated in the Kathmandu valley. I did travel to Pokhara (approximately 200 km west of Kathmandu) to meet

193 Jane F. Collier, "The Waxing and Waning of 'Subfields' in North American Sociocultural Anthropology," in *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

194 The class at the Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies (HCTS) was entitled "The Global Contemporary: Exhibitions and Art from Anthropological Perspective." It took place during the Summer Semester of 2011, was led by Christiane Brosius and Catherine Bublitzky, and included an excursion to the *Venice Biennale*, notably to do research on the Indian pavilion curated by Ranjit Hoskote for a seminar project.

one artist and followed a group of artists to a residency in Mustang (north-west of Kathmandu, bordering Tibet), but here too the majority of my research was carried out in the capital (eleven and a half months between 2014 and 2017). In line with my overall research question, I remained open about what locality meant and let my research partners guide me through the spaces and scales of their movements. I followed them to places beyond my main field sites (such as different cities and villages) and to hitherto unknown spaces within these field sites, such as the contested heritage buildings in Old Dhaka or the *bāhāhs* (courtyards) and *tols* (neighborhoods) in Kathmandu.

During my fieldwork, I took extensive notes (about observations, conversations, daily happenings), made audio and visual recordings (such as photographs, fast sketches, outlines) and actively participated in a variety of situations. I volunteered with *1mile²* and the *PKTM* festival, agreed to write several catalog texts, assisted in setting up exhibitions, led two workshops,¹⁹⁵ and presented my research in the form of a lecture at Kathmandu University (KU). I interacted with artists on a regular basis and participated in their activities, which allowed me to ask and repeat questions in various situations and examine verbal testimonies alongside executed practices. Participant observation is not a fail-safe method for misinterpretations or a guarantee for a holistic analysis, but it enabled me to build a reference framework that I could read against more formally acquired data. I collected and recorded seventy-two interviews with artists, educators, and representatives of art institutions (foundations, galleries) using a variety of interviewing styles, depending on my respective interview partner, the timeframe, and the space for each interview.¹⁹⁶ I had a roughly drafted questionnaire, but studio visits were largely open-ended.¹⁹⁷ The information I was able to obtain from these methods was however often limited; people do not usually comment or reflect on their everyday actions while executing them.¹⁹⁸ The “go-along” became a complementary tool to gain access to the artists’ experience and cultural brokerage of localities. It involved accompanying one or more go-along partners on an outing, asking questions inspired by a certain behavior or place along the way, and

195 The first workshop was part of the “Curating Workshop Series” organized by the Siddhartha Arts Foundation Education Initiative and brought together key figures of the local contemporary art landscape. The second workshop was part of the PIXELATION workshop series, organized by Britto.

196 For an overview of participant observation and interview techniques, see Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 312–325.

197 I acquired a basic understanding of Bengali during my studies at the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg and started taking private Nepali lessons from my second fieldtrip (2014) onwards. These language skills allowed me to follow and participate in daily conversations, yet I rarely made use of them in direct interview situations. Nearly all the artists I interviewed were more or less fluent in English. See chapter seven for a more explicit discussion on the use of English in the arts fields of Nepal and Bangladesh.

198 Margarethe Kusenbach, “Street Phenomenology: The Go-Along as Ethnographic Research Tool,” *Ethnography* 4, no. 3 (2003): 459.

listening to or even recording these explanations.¹⁹⁹ As I aimed to retrace a network of contemporary art from my research partners' perspective, these go-alongs were my entry to their experiences, values, and strategies to explore new spaces, conceive art projects, and negotiate access to space, materials, and ideas.

Apart from the go-along, I also adopted a more process-oriented, passive, less directed and systematic "hanging-out" approach.²⁰⁰ This approach grew out of a challenge in fieldwork directly related to the new kind of rapprochement between researcher and research partner I mentioned above. During the first months of research, I noticed many occasions in which I had written in my notes where and with whom I had lunch or dinner. I accurately recorded information that I perceived to be important for my research question, such as comments on exhibitions or specific institutions. The rest of the conversations I frequently summarized as: "we/they talked about people they know," or "we/they talked about people who are not present." Upon closer examination, I realized that in those moments—lunches, dinners, parties, or idle afternoons—in which I had decided that seemingly nothing of relevance to the arts, and thus my research topic, was happening, I did not stop observing or reflecting on what I was experiencing, but I was less concentrated and allowed my mind to wander. In hindsight, these "hanging-out" situations proved to be marginal only on the surface. They appear casual and unsystematic, yet they constitute an important form of collaborative and practice-related contact. The brain keeps working, despite (or because of) the influence of food and stimulating conversations. Artists exchange information on other artists, mutual acquaintances, current projects, and events in the art field. They negotiate cultural, political, and social affinities, and discuss challenges and successes. These situations fulfill an important role in brokering cultural and social capital and are thus crucial for the constitution of a collective contemporary art identity. While I focus on some of these situations in particular in my last chapter, a considerable amount of information relating to other case studies stems from observations and notes taken while hanging-out, often recorded after the fact, from memory.

199 Kusenbach, "Street Phenomenology," 463.

200 Deep hanging out as an ethnographic method was first mentioned by Renato Rosaldo at a Stanford conference (1994) in order to emphasize the distinctiveness and validity of anthropological ethnography in the absence of extended co-residence—one of the pillars of participant observation. The notion was taken up by James Clifford to describe the particularities of the emerging style of fieldwork in urban spaces. This fieldwork was not understood as "intensive dwelling," but as "repeated visiting" and collaborative work. Despite the vast application of "deep hanging out" in anthropology today, as Ben Walmsley accurately observes, there is little literature available. Kusenbach, "Street Phenomenology," 463. See James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 56; Ben Walmsley, "Deep Hanging Out in the Arts: An Anthropological Approach to Capturing Cultural Value," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 24, no. 2 (March 2018): 276–277.

The notion of the network shaped the organization of my research material and the structure of this book in two ways. First, inspired by ANT, I approached artworks and art projects as constitutive nodes in my constructed network. Such as in this introduction, every chapter contains an interlude—a description of a specific situation that introduces the core issues of the chapter and subsequently guides my discussion. Second, with the aim to represent both the interconnectedness of situations and the situatedness of connections, the book is divided into two parts. The first five chapters focus on specific situations or scales of locality. Throughout the respective chapters, I show how these situations are interconnected and transgressed by the collectives' transcultural brokerage. In the last two chapters, I reverse my perspective: I focus on specific connections and analyze how these become temporarily located within particular situations. I begin my investigation of an emerging translocal contemporaneity by focusing on the two localities that feature prominently in the title: the nation-states Nepal and Bangladesh. I examine how, through their artworks, artists contest the states' cultural labor to produce coherent images of the nation, and how they open spaces of encounter for a plurality of discourses on national identity. In the second chapter, I move to the locality of the city. Here, my research partners' creative place-making allows for a more holistic approach to the urban environment. My discussion of Dhaka and Kathmandu recognizes the different fabrics of spaces within the city and their interconnectedness. The third and fourth chapters focus on the field(s) of art production in Nepal and Bangladesh. Although formal fine art education has opened the practice of art to a broader socio-cultural group than the caste-based system of material production in place before, contemporary artists do not believe in the futures this education offers. Collectively, they shape new ways of knowledge transmission, for instance by teaching in the recently established private institutions. Artists increasingly contest the general authority of national institutions in values of art and culture. Rather than relying on the opportunities offered by these institutions, artists establish multi-scalar connections to actors outside the field, thus broadening their scope of action and establishing a new peer system for their art practice. The large-scale art event, discussed in chapter five, is one of the emerging avenues of the collectives to reach audiences on multiple scales and strengthen their group identity as contemporary practitioners. New powerful actors, such as the Samdani Art Foundation, can be crucial allies for the artists, but big art events can also expose competition for the same positions in the field. The last two chapters center on the qualities of the connections established by contemporary artists from Nepal and Bangladesh. Through the examples of performance art (chapter six), and digital media and English (chapter seven), I examine my research partners' preference for decentered, multilateral, and reciprocal communication. The international workshop and the hanging-out situations are crucial nodes for the shaping of affinities that lead to the conception of a collective contemporary art-based identity as community.