
Final Thoughts

A TRANSLOCAL CONTEMPORARY

This book set out to look at a contemporary situation in the artistic field(s) of Nepal and Bangladesh marked by transcultural contact. My aim was to provide a nuanced record of the spatial, institutional, and socio-cultural mobilities within these fields, and through them, to develop a refined theoretical approach to examine the processes of transfer and exchange commonly lumped together under the header of globalization. I was especially interested in mapping a situation marked by actors in locales outside the center who are not claiming a position in a global contemporary, but actively shaping a dynamic, multi-scalar contemporary field through their positionings.

The widely established notion of a “global contemporary”¹⁰⁹⁷ is marked by the persistent belief in the authority of European and American actors, institutions, and sites in defining artistic values, not only in Euro-America but in a global art field. Researchers, curators, and art writers adhering to this theory have created the impression of a deterritorialized, omnipresent global visual culture to which all contemporary artists, no matter their origin or current base, have free access.¹⁰⁹⁸ However, the idea of a synchronous and open global artistic field hides asymmetries that remain constantly visible to the artists attempting to move in it, especially those based in what is perceived as the periphery. The contemporary practice of artists from the so-called periphery is treated like a local application of a global trend. The events they organize are discussed as local replicas of globally travelling formats, and their fields are localized in a territory-culture construct, celebrated as new additions to the contemporary art map, or deplored as sites at the “end of the global development spectrum.”¹⁰⁹⁹ As a result of these localizing practices, artists are treated as spokespeople for a specific nation-culture.¹¹⁰⁰ The tropes that continue to locate innovation and modernity solely in the center of the presumed global visual culture and their accompanying asymmetries go hand in hand with economic

1097 Bydler, *Global Art World*; Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary*.

1098 Belting, “Contemporary Art as Global Art”; Harris, “In and Out of Place”; Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*.

1099 Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu*, 4.

1100 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 47.

disadvantages, visa restrictions, and the lack of infrastructural support in the national fields of art from which they emerge. Together, these mechanisms impede the motility of artists outside the center.

Above all, this book shows how over the past two decades the young generation of artists in Nepal and Bangladesh have used the format of the collective as a strategy to level these asymmetries. They push into new spaces using diverse formats, from public art projects to international perennial events. Thereby they not only grow their reach of action by connecting to diverse actors in and outside the field, they also actively contest the way their localities are represented and coproduce the fields from which they emerged. For researchers working in the mobile center of the artistic field, the connections that artists build to the center (its institutions, events, and actors) are most evidently visible. Although I had worked in Bangladesh before starting my research, I became aware of its contemporary art scene only through its first appearance at the *Venice Biennale* in 2011. Our investigation into contemporary art practices needs to go beyond unilateral local-global connections lest we continue to comprehend the contemporary situation exclusively through the entry of the Other into a eurocentric global field, as has been the dominant perspective since Jean-Hubert Martin's exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre George Pompidou in 1989.¹¹⁰¹

Anthropology makes it possible to “follow” the multi-scalar positionings of actors as a collective strategy, from their perspective.¹¹⁰² It allows for a dynamic, multilateral, and decentered record of contemporary practices. This book is the result of five years of research and repeated long-term visits in Nepal and Bangladesh between 2013 and 2017, during which I followed contemporary artists involved in collaborative action—referred to here as my research partners—from the Venice-based large-scale art event, to a street art festival in Old Dhaka, to an alternative art space on Green Road in Dhanmondi. I followed two archival photography collections from a heritage building in Old Dhaka, to the Patan Museum, to a Newari neighborhood in Kathmandu. I followed the medium of performance art through the practice of one artist, and I followed my research partners into more intimate and personal hanging-out situations. Through this multi-sited and multi-scalar ethnography, I was able to observe the cultural brokerage in which artists manifestly or unconsciously engage while being mobile.¹¹⁰³

Through their physical and digital mobility, artists are exposed to hitherto unknown people, practices, ideas, and visualities. These encounters represent an “outside” to the discourses they emerged from, a state which they often experience as creative freedom—an undominated space from

1101 Belting, “Contemporary Art as Global Art,” 58.

1102 Marcus, “Ethnography In/Of the World System”; see also Siegenthaler, “Towards an Ethnographic Turn.”

1103 Von der Höh, Jaspert, and Oesterle, “Courts, Brokers and Brokerage.”

which creative realization can arise.¹¹⁰⁴ The new experiences and the resulting creations transgress the visual discourses that artists emerged from or dwell in; they question hitherto acquired knowledge, delegitimize hegemonic visualities, and unhinge settled circumscriptions. It is this transgression—the contestation of established boundaries, the experimentation with and the formulation of novel approaches—that turns mediation into transcultural brokerage. Because this brokerage presupposes mobility, my research partners feel an urgency to connect beyond their face-to-face contacts. Yet the developments and changes that they pursue through their brokerage are in many cases directed at this face-to-face community (their colleagues, partners, and friends) and the locality in which they dwell. Transcultural brokerage thus hinges on a balance between a tendency toward autonomy and a desire to connect.

The Britto Arts Trust (Britto) uses the *Venice Biennale* as a platform to actively question the socio-cultural and religious norms that divide people in Bangladesh. Tayeba Begum Lipi investigates gender roles, while Mahbubur Rahman examines the repercussions of religious division in daily practices, like the treatment of livestock. Promotesh Das Pulak more directly contests the cultural labor of the state that goes into creating an identity for the comparatively young nation of Bangladesh. This identity, promoted by political propaganda, schoolbooks, national media, and other institutions is based on the construction of a unified Bengali people, a “superethnos” that continues to legitimize the nation’s claim for political independence.¹¹⁰⁵ Pulak’s manipulation of archival photography from the 1971 war questions these unilateral national narratives. *Echoed Moments in Time* creates a space of encounter for alternative identities—a space where more inclusive narratives become imaginable.¹¹⁰⁶ Through the exhibition in Venice, Pulak and his Britto colleagues connect to a young generation of intellectuals, writers, and bloggers in Bangladesh demanding the negotiation of a more inclusive conception of national identity. The ability of the young generation to foster a rethinking of current socio-political processes seems even more relevant at a time when political organs use their power to actively silence such critical voices. The case of photographer and Drik founder Shahidul Alam comes to mind. In August 2018, Alam was charged under Section 57 of the Information Technology and Communication Act (2006) for the dissemination of critical comments about the nation-state in relation to protests over road safety.¹¹⁰⁷ His arrest, although cause for deep concern, is also a testimony to the crucial role artists have in brokering the concerns of wider civil society.

1104 Clark, “Asian Artists.”

1105 Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*.

1106 Pinney, *Coming of Photography in India*.

1107 Khademul Islam, “Jail Time in Bangladesh,” *Himal Southasian*, September 14, 2018, accessed September 24, 2018, <http://himalmag.com/jail-time-in-bangladesh-shahidul-alam-central-jail/>.

I chose Britto's presence at the 54th *Venice Biennale* as my first case study because it manifests my entry into the field of contemporary art production and because the artists' works led me to a theoretical investigation of the nation-states that figure in the title of this book: Bangladesh and Nepal. Despite growing critique for its nation-based format, the biennial in Venice continues to be perceived as the "*grande dame*" of perennial exhibitions by artists, researchers, and publics alike.¹¹⁰⁸ But due to the strategies of young contemporary artists such as those I investigated in Nepal and Bangladesh, events outside the established art centers have become crucial nodes for the distribution of cultural and social capital. Since its initial edition in 2000, *Chobi Mela (CM)* has become an important node for the forging and sustaining of alliances with a worldwide photographic community. Further, festivals like *CM* and *Photo Kathmandu (PKTM)* emphasize the artists' dynamic relation with their locality. Through their organizers' strategic interventions, photography and art become instrumental in unsettling fixed notions of "locality," rethinking it as a complex matrix of various rhythms and socio-cultural and political entanglements. Contributing artists claim the right to represent a majority world and to contest hegemonic visualities by bringing ordinary people (in the form of archival studio photography) or topics like gender and sex (Lipi's "Room of My Own") into the discourse. The contemporary generation transgresses the relative autonomy of their national art fields, vertically, by connecting with funding agencies, curators, and artist-run platforms on other scales, and horizontally, by fostering interdisciplinary exchange and consciously intervening in socio-political processes. This is part of the artists' avant-garde practice, making them desirable to an art market that craves newness. Rising actors like the Samdani Art Foundation can be powerful allies in transgressing the nationally circumscribed fields and connecting individual artists to art markets. Yet accessing markets is only one of my research partners' avenues and it often happens on an individual, rather than a collective, level. In collective initiatives, which was my research focus, the strategy is primarily focused on building solidarities and improving the conditions for contemporary art production. Here, erstwhile allies can become competitors in the claim for authority of representation and defining artistic values.

The motivations to launch perennial events are multilayered and go beyond the intention to establish relations with the center, i.e., to get on the global art map. The dynamic strategies and know-how underlying large-scale events, however, can only be captured through long-term ethnography. Being in the field before, during, and after events allowed me for instance to posit *PKTM's* archival photography exhibitions as part of photo.circle's (PC) extensive strategy to use the visual archive, the Nepal Picture Library (NPL), not as a fixed repository for personal memorabilia but as a dynamic generator of vernacular stories; in ever new constellations, the photographs (re)write a more inclusive national history. Due to

1108 Bydler, *Global Art World*, 100.

the multi-scalar intent of their strategies, the collectives that shape these events (by organizing or participating in them) contest the national institutions' authority in defining the values of art and culture. The events become platforms that connect like-minded actors, ranging from inhabitants of specific neighborhoods to international photography communities. Through these multi-scalar connections, my research partners initiate a new peer system, in which the meaning of their work neither depends on national institutions nor the centers of the art world. Instead, it arises from the shopkeeper, who agrees to exhibit an artwork in their shop, from the local authorities who allow their community center to be used as an exhibition ground, from women in Bangladesh who feel represented by Lipi's work, from young photographers in South Asia who are looking for visual inspiration beyond Western media representations, from international curators who connect to the values of multilateral contact, from supranational funding agencies, and from collectors and buyers.

Moreover, large-scale events do not happen in a vacuum. They create momentum, but for my research partners, they are only one part of a year-round program. *1mile²* or *Kolor Kathmandu (KK)* are month-long projects that, despite the ephemerality of the site-specific artworks, cause long-term engagements with the city, be they a new consciousness for cultural and architectural heritage, or an appreciation for street art. Both case studies constitute examples for a holistic approach to the city that recognizes its different fabrics and interconnectedness. Fluid formats like street art festivals, workshops, and residencies also reveal the need for more stable, continued institutions. One strategy of transforming the nationally circumscribed art fields in a more substantial and lasting way is to engage in higher education. Alam founded the Pathshala South Asia Media Institute in order to guarantee a more structured inflow of knowledge beyond perennial workshops. A similar motivation pushed Sujana Chitrakar to establish the Center for Art and Design at the Kathmandu University (KU). Through these diverse formats and approaches, each based on long-term personal experience and tailored to specific desired outcomes, the artist-initiatives become "spurring factors;" they manipulate, crosscut, and transgress social, disciplinary, and geographical boundaries of national fields.

THE ROLE OF COLLECTIVE EFFORT

I have devoted a large part of this book to describing the various instances in which artist collectives become important driving forces in the artistic fields of Nepal and Bangladesh. The collective hub at *Unseen Amsterdam* is the latest, but surely not the last, expression of their accomplishment. The recognition of their cutting-edge art practices by the organizers in Amsterdam emphasizes their continued transgression of established field boundaries: their experimentation with both inherited practices and new mediums and techniques, as well as their conscious engagement with socio-cultural and political issues. While the global contemporary

framework acknowledges the art market's craving for innovation and novelty, its underlying diffusionist rhetoric does not recognize artists working in the periphery as the creators of new visualities, meanings, and discourses. Rather, it constrains them as novel expressions of already established formulations. It is important to consider my research partners' multi-scalar positionings alongside the prevailing asymmetries in the global field of art production. Their positionings are not always the result of strategic choices; in many cases, they are born out of a necessity—an attempt to use every accessible resource in order to gain agency. The use of public spaces as exhibition sites during *PKTM* for instance is primarily due to the lack of available galleries and museums in Nepal. Similarly, Britto's hands-on mentality and convivial place-making during the installation of their exhibition in Venice resulted from a lack of financial resources. Hard work underlies the young generation's flexibility and dynamic scope of action. This is the reason why the format of the collective is so crucial.

"Collective" is an emic category that I initially used as a *Denkfigur*,¹¹⁰⁹ an idea to examine creative collective practices. Over the course of my research, I realized that the collectivities I observed consisted of more than specific collaborative initiatives—they mark a tension between affinity and autonomy. On the one hand, the format of the collective offers emotional and practical support in terms of shared responsibilities, economic resources, socio-cultural capital, and the transmission of decentered and multilateral knowledge through workshops, shared libraries, and talk programs. On the other hand, it facilitates the experience of freedom: creative freedom, freedom from disciplinary and personal norms, from social expectations, responsibilities, and rules. At the same time, being a member of a collective requires commitment in the form of time and energy spent for the collective good, and in the form of forwarded socio-cultural capital. The position of the collective in the field can substantially shift individual positions. Yet collectivity is also strategically used to reach multi-positionality; it is directed towards the needs of the local artist's community, and serves a desire for global connection.

One of the most important characteristics of the artist collective is its inclusion of different ethnic, religious, caste, and gender identities. Over the past decades, class has become a new identifier. However, this notion of class is less related to socio-economic background than to actual everyday life practice: The vast majority of my research partners live in or near urban areas. They hold a university degree, speak English, and are, to a certain extent, mobile. At the same time, many have experienced economic insecurities during their lives and continue to depend on travel grants, networks of hospitality, the occasional odd job, or the support of their family. Irrespective of their individual backgrounds, collectively they can cut across older social hierarchies and recent socio-political conflicts.

1109 Mader, "Einleitung."

Less established situations on the margins of the artistic field, like the international workshop or hanging out, are crucial nodes for the negotiation of this notion of collectivity. The workshop proactively fosters multilateral, decentered, and mutual transfers of knowledge about new mediums, techniques, and current visualities. It is this multilateral exchange and its reciprocal intent, paired with the practice of transcultural brokerage and the resulting unsettling of established discourses, that distinguishes “contact” from mere “impact.”¹¹¹⁰ While the workshop creates contact by intent, the hanging-out situation serves this purpose more latently. Talking about other members of the field allows like-minded actors to keep updated and connected—to feel some sort of belonging to a community. This idea of community is formed through an extension of the values of collectivity to a larger group of people—face-to-face, as the international participants in the workshop, or imagined as a potential translocal artist community. The idea of community, irrespective of scale and form of contact, points to shared behavior: transcultural brokerage as the basis for the formulation of new ideas and practices paired with the tedious work of multi-scalar institution building. Rather than on presumed socio-cultural communalities defined by geographical proximity or national belonging, my research partners’ reference to community indicates a conscious focus on “affinities,”¹¹¹¹ such as shared challenges and successes, an openness for new ideas, mutual respect, the conventions of hanging out, and the interest in and responsibility of the community’s well-being. However, this does not mean that individual positions are of no consequence; they can become substantial motivations to create art or lead to collective reflections on the politics of representation and identity.

The invocation of community does not actually determine affinities,¹¹¹² but it can have a galvanizing effect on collaborative force. I argue that in the case of the young generation of contemporary artists in Nepal and Bangladesh, it brings into being a new translocal art field. The actors in this field, my research partners, believe that the practices they share are different from those in other fields. There are transgressions of other fields, conscious and latent, vertical and horizontal, and collaborations across disciplines; the field’s autonomy is relative. Through their connections on multiple scales, my research partners have created a system of peer criteria, in which supranational funding organizations determine the field’s values as much as the shopkeeper offering his space during *PKTM*. Lastly, initially fluid formats such as perennial workshops or small events have been crucial vantage points from which to negotiate more durable connections and spaces. Over the past two decades the artists have been engaged in developing an artist-run infrastructure that operates complementary to, and sometimes also in competition with, established infrastructure on other scales.

1110 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*.

1111 Rezende, “Building Affinity Through Friendship,” 92–93.

1112 Postill, “Localizing the Internet.”

LOCALITY FROM A TRANSCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE—
TRANSLOCAL ETHNOGRAPHY

How does this discussion of collectivity and contemporaneity contribute to the growing field of transcultural studies? This book maps contemporaneity beyond universally aimed and homogenizing theories like the global contemporary, as well as beyond anthropological relativisms that often treat research sites (even if conceived as multi-sited) as autonomous units. The latter runs the risk of presupposing communalities based on shared geography, religion, or language, rather than following what actually engenders connection. Contemporary art is a transgressive force. By following its practice through a polymorphous translocal ethnography, I investigated its autonomy—the definitions, meanings, canons, and infrastructure active in this field—through processes of mobility and the connections built by artists in Nepal and Bangladesh. I showed how every situation, every field, and therefore every locality—as the lived experience of space—is interconnected and multi-layered. And every connection, every flow, is temporarily situated. Only in conceiving locality through this dynamic process of shaping and reshaping can we overcome conceptions of globalization as deterritorialized flows and of localities as territorialized expressions. And only in looking at shared practices and affinities, rather than presuming established commonalities, can we overcome the academic traditions of methodological nationalism and area studies.

The uniqueness of the anthropological approach is its ability to investigate contemporary art beyond established spaces of material and symbolic art productions, such as the studio, the museum, or the gallery. By applying anthropology's most crucial method, participant observation, I gathered empirical knowledge about what it means to be part of the contemporary fields of art in(between) Bangladesh and Nepal.¹¹¹³ I learned about contemporary art practice not only from observing and talking to people, but from actively partaking in projects: I helped to install exhibitions, assisted in the realization of art installations, wrote catalog texts, and cooperated with the documentation team of a festival. I accompanied artists into private homes, tight knit *to/s* (neighborhoods), classrooms, and shared lazy afternoons. Only together did these localities and the related practices give a glimpse into the dynamic and processual formation of contemporaneity. They show how a new generation of contemporary artists use collective effort and collaborative action to contribute to the production of their localities and their artistic fields. Their cultural and spatial brokerage is instrumental in unhinging the status quo of socio-cultural and political processes, hegemonic claims to locality, eurocentric canons, and outdated curricula—and is instrumental in shaping them anew.

1113 Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 342.

A QUEST FOR NEW ENTRIES?

The work of the collectives mentioned in this book—Britto Arts Trust, Bindu—A Space for Artists, photo.circle, Drik, Sattya Media Arts Collective, ArTree, and many others—distinguishes itself through a focus on affinity. Its members are driven by a common interest in furthering art through reciprocal and decentered exchange. What happens if these collectives become too institutionalized? Too commodified? Canonized?

By writing a book about the emerging contemporaneity in (between) the artistic fields of Nepal and Bangladesh, I have contributed to the canonization of the collectives and artists mentioned. I have also engaged in the quest for new entries by bringing Nepal and Bangladesh into the academic discourse of visual culture and contemporary art. Neither the artists, nor we as researchers or curators, can avoid this quest. For my research partners, the strategy of multi-positionality seems to have paid off. It allows them to maintain their flexibility to jump scales, contest asymmetries, and broaden their reach. For us, I believe that it is important not to succumb to ready-made and generalizing theories, nor treat our case studies as self-contained units. Instead, we must recognize the motivations that drive the actors we work with, the asymmetries they face, and the boundaries they transgress. From there, we can contribute to the construction of bases for multilateral exchange and transcultural solidarities.