

Editorial Note

Art making has been a relational activity since time immemorial, though infrequently acknowledged as such. During recent decades, dialogical art practice has received a name—collaborative, participatory or socially engaged art—and has become the subject of a burgeoning theoretical discourse. This issue of *The Journal of Transcultural Studies*, devoted to the theme of artistic collaboration, positions itself in this research field. The contributions assembled by its guest editor, Franziska Koch, all explore the unfolding of collective art projects through extended interaction and shared labor, and seek to view this collaborative art practice through a transcultural lens. Artistic collaboration builds on an expansive definition of art that extends its significance beyond the singular, discrete object, which is the work of art, to encompass a set of human relationships engendered by its production and its reception. This in turn has reconfigured the artist as participant in a process rather than an individual creator, the work as a long-term ongoing project, and the viewer as co-producer rather than consumer or contemplative spectator. The proposition that views art primarily as an activity has brought forth a host of experiments in a multitude of global locations—a project to design hand pumps for drawing water among the Adivasi community in Central India, a Thai soup kitchen at the Venice Biennale, an artist-led workshop in Johannesburg to teach unemployed people new fashion skills and discuss collective solidarity, a collectively designed park in Hamburg, or a politically charged performance involving asylum-seekers assembled in shipping containers facing Vienna’s Opera House. Even as the objectives and the outlook of the artists and groups involved vary enormously, they all claim to be linked by a belief in the empowering creativity of collective action and shared ideas, conceived of as a way of resisting the culture of spectacle.

The available critical frameworks for interpreting collaborative art projects—discussed by Koch in her Introduction to this issue—have all grown out of specific contexts and respond to their exigencies.¹ From a transcultural perspective it becomes necessary to ask whether our conceptual lexicon for collaborative art practices can be made to transcend the parochialism that comes from the intellectual location of existing theoretical models, and to take into account the constitutive role of mobility and engagement with cultural difference for art making. The five articles in this issue investigate

¹ Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), a leading contribution to the field, is positioned against the post-structuralist turn taken by critical theory in the aftermath of May 1968 in France. Similarly Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012) was written following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of cold war polarities.

collaborative practices at sites that do not bear the weight of concerns internal to avant-garde and contemporary art from Europe and North America. Instead, their authors re-engage with some of the genre's controversial questions, and endeavor to refine its paradigmatic positions by unpacking the notion of collaboration as contingent and conditional.

The different case studies, summarized by Koch, all begin by investigating processes that unfold in creative relationships beyond boundaries, be these national, regional, institutional, linguistic, or ecological. Staple writing on contemporary art has tended to valorize collaboration as an invariably productive, interactive relationship that deserves to be read as an important artistic gesture of resistance, but the transcultural transactions uncovered in the contributions that follow take us beyond experiences of a magnanimous togetherness or even an avant-garde understanding of art-as-subversion, and point instead to instances of friction, partial or unresolved communication, destabilizing moments, or “diffractive effects,” as Paul Gladston terms them. Distinct institutional contexts impinge on the dialogical relationships unraveled by the case studies: for example, the study of Haema Sivanesan, involving a metropolitan media artist of Indian origin and members of an Indigenous forest community in Western Canada; or alternatively, the article by Katia Olalde, who recuperates the dynamics of memorializing Mexican victims of violence in a project involving professional artists, volunteer activists, and members of the public. These differing contexts in which the various actors are embedded require us to pay attention to practices, memories, and histories in which each of the groups is already circumscribed, and brings something different to the encounter.

While region and locality are central to each of the collaborative projects investigated, they are all invariably overlaid by the question of the national, which imposes as an interpretive framework a vision of culture that claims to be as homogenous as it is consensual. As Shao-Lan Hertel's study of artistic collaboration between a modernist calligrapher and a conceptual painter shows, Chinese calligraphic art, canonized as a unique and incomparable civilizational product, is capable of being “deterritorialized” following a transcultural encounter with the seemingly incommensurable practice of a painter of comic strips, in a process where differences are domesticated, even sublimated, without being effaced from the surface of the work.

The nexus between the nation and culture is also effectively destabilized when Katia Olalde subjects the different cultural strands making up a “Mexican” modernity to a *longue durée* enquiry: the formative role of Christianity, once a colonial imposition, transcultured and localized over centuries, or the vision of citizenship not contained within the territorial frontiers of the nation-state, call for an understanding of culture that was rarely constituted from within national borders, and therefore can no longer be credibly contained within them.

Seen through a transcultural lens, the conceptualization of Indigeneity as an oppositional force within a national formation serves as a corrective to a romantic vision of communities resistant to a modernity of which they are seen as victims. In this instance too, a historical *longue durée* approach reminds us that the domain of the “Indigenous” was implicated in global movements over the past centuries and—in the case of North America—partook of transforming movements such as the Black Atlantic. If we are to stop writing the history of the modern as a story of a unidirectional diffusion, we must recognize that “Indigenous” modernity was always already transcultured.

The “collaborative turn” in contemporary art, with its focus on interaction that transcends authorship and the artwork as end-product, has confronted critical writing with the dilemma of “how to evaluate such relations *as art*.”² By remaining firmly anchored within the domain of “art,” the contributions to this issue show the way to investigating the concept of art and its institutions as transcultural phenomena. The insights they furnish urge us to read art as a migrant concept, transformed by diverse and fluid understandings of agency that rest on reciprocal distribution, or alternatively, that transcend the domain of the human, as Theresa Deichert shows. Art practice, no longer confined to canonical genres, continues to be enriched by local and regional practices of the “periphery.” While the essays take us into the realms where the “local” is embedded, each of the studies of collaborative art brought together in this issue moves between scales and signals to connections to other times, other places, and other worlds.

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2 Jason Miller, “Activism vs. Antagonism: Socially Engaged Art from Bourriaud to Bishop and Beyond,” *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism* (2016): 165–184, 166 (italics in the original).