

ACADEMIA | Letters

Strikes of networks of (ex)change(s)

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The 1990s saw the WWW bursting into the world with the growth of the Internet in many network methods that lead to unification via the hiding of the distinctions that made them and – within the fields of art and culture – the same decade witnessed a move to broaden non-western geographies via the amalgamation of multiple cultures through western perspectives and formats, a move that is still ongoing in the present. Upon entering in the 2020s, the world faced a pandemic that is impacting tremendously in the arts and culture at a global level. However, the risk exposure associated with these creative sectors is clearly uneven across the diverse regions of the globe.

As contemporary art institutions become increasingly global/ international/ transnational in their scope, they face tremendous responsibilities such as: to collect, to preserve, and to show the (hidden) multi micro-narratives told by the many who make the world. In such processes, institutions are also to be held accountable for the working conditions of the diverse artists and cultural producers with whom they collaborate being this so called diversity advocated as core by and to the institutions. This became particularly visible during the global pandemic when staff costs cuts had to be made and these were unevenly made. An example which was widely discussed was the Tate Modern, in which “as many as 200 jobs are at risk in its commercial arm – which operates retail, publishing and catering – where a higher proportion of staff are BAME, according to the PCS union” (Quinn, 2020)¹. For the aims of the current exploratory research, we will not be focusing on collecting and preserving but on showing work from different parts of the world and in the institutional implications and

¹Quinn, Ben (2020). “Tate faces protests over impact of job cuts on BAME staff”. *The Guardian*, July 26th 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jul/26/tate-faces-protests-over-job-cuts-impact-on-bame-staff> Last accessed January 22nd 2021.

responsibilities of working within diversity.

Alike speculative realism (Harman, 2018)², and while challenging the multipolar Western institutional structures (grand-narratives told by few) that they inhabit (Gupta and Watson, 2016)³, the responsibilities of contemporary art institutions appear to imply a spirit of collaborative networks, imaginative audacity, mutability, and exchange, integrating both human and non-human experiences, knowledge, and stories, a spirit that became even more needed in the 2020s, when a global challenge was felt in asymmetric ways across the world.

Considering the danger of hegemonic absorption of dissonant practices into canonical art historical and curatorial discourses – which would imply, alike the Internet networks' protocols, the deactivation of conflictual questions that may defy Western constructions of notions of quality, influence, originality, work of art vs. artifact etc. –, this research project aims to ask:

- How do contemporary art institutions respond to (and, therefore, (ex)change with) the different challenges – challenges that are curatorial, art historical, educational, but also economic and political – posed by the exhibition of works made by individuals from a variety of world regions?
- How can contemporary art institutions reflect upon, respond to, and (ex)change with the uneven ways that the different regions of the world are faced with global phenomena such as the COVID-19?
- What kind of world(s) can we imagine from various (networks of) (ex)change(s)?
- What if the existing methodologies of networks as we know them – based on finding a common ground and, therefore, silencing the differences of each one – would go on strike and, instead of quieting conflict, they would instead implement new tools and methods for collaboration, mutual understanding, and solidarity?

While these are large questions that shape an ambitious conceptual framework, the research will turn close attention to micro histories rather than the grand political and cultural narratives that became accepted as the history of the last three decades and are shaping the early 2020s. This process will lead to a series of speculations rather than definite answers.

The exploration will begin with a literature search, as well as a focus group discussion, and develop with the critical analysis of two large scale cooperation projects between artistic and

²Harman, Graham. 2018. *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*, Polity: Cambridge, ISBN 9781509519996.

³Watson, Grant, and Gupta, Sunil. 2016. Panel convened by Nada Raza. *Transnationalism In Practice: Strategies Of Affect*, Tate Research Centre: Asia, Tate Britain, London, 7 December 2016.

cultural institutions which are European and co-funded by the Creative Europe programme of the European Commission while claiming to have a transnational scope beyond the European and are based on collaboration and networking towards social transformation: the *4Cs: from Conflict to Conviviality through Creativity and Culture*, and *Our Many Europes*. These projects will end in 2021 and 2022, respectively, and both made adjustments at the conceptual and the management levels due to the COVID-19. It is also important to mention that the activities of these projects – despite their European ground – evolve in a transnational scope, by showing work from different parts of the world and by working transnationally, beyond Europe.

This exploratory research seeks to create hypotheses around concepts – internationalism, transnationalism, and globalisation - and methodologies – collaboration, exchange and mutability - rather than test them. Data from our exploratory studies will be qualitative and will include brainstorming sessions and interviews with experts.

The title echoes writer and theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's calls to 'strike', which are prompts - addressed to museum workers, photographers, historians, and the governed – that are regarded as tools in the larger project of unlearning imperialism, beginning with the multiple ways in which we all participate in imperial violence in our various roles and locations. *Strikes of networks of (ex)change(s)*, therefore is a prompt to untangle internationalism, transnationalism and globalisation from multiple perspectives and histories – and to speculate on what we might want from it today.