

The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro, Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

This book examines how we can conceive of a 'postcolonial museum' in the contemporary epoch of mass migrations, the internet and digital technologies. The authors consider the museum space, practices and institutions in the light of repressed histories, sounds, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures. Focusing on the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, is to propose a living archive formed through creation, participation, production and innovation. The aim is to propose a critical assessment of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that challenge the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought. This involves a search for new strategies and critical approaches in the fields of museum and heritage studies which will renew and extend understandings of European citizenship and result in an inevitable re-evaluation of the concept of 'modernity' in a so-called globalised and multicultural world.

Long overdue, here is a volume that updates and reconfigures the intersection of postcolonial critique with multiple interpretations of the museum and social praxis in globalisation. The Postcolonial Museum charts gaps, achievements and prospects in 20 chapters that re-interpret the connection of past and current imperialisms. Introducing a wealth of new voices, this is essential reading for anyone interested in curatorial practice and theory, modern and contemporary art, ethnography, museology and the interventionist potential of research in the humanities overall.

Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK

Cover image: *The Tomb of Qara Kóz* by Ronni Ahmmed and Ebadur Rahman, Venice Biennale, Lido, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and the curator, Ebadur Rahman.

ASHGATE

Ashgate Publishing Limited
Wey Court East, Union Road,
Farnham, Surrey,
GU9 7PT, England

www.ashgate.com

ISBN 978-1-4724-1567-7



9 781472 415677

The Postcolonial Museum

Chambers, De Angelis, Ianniciello,
Orabona and Quadraro

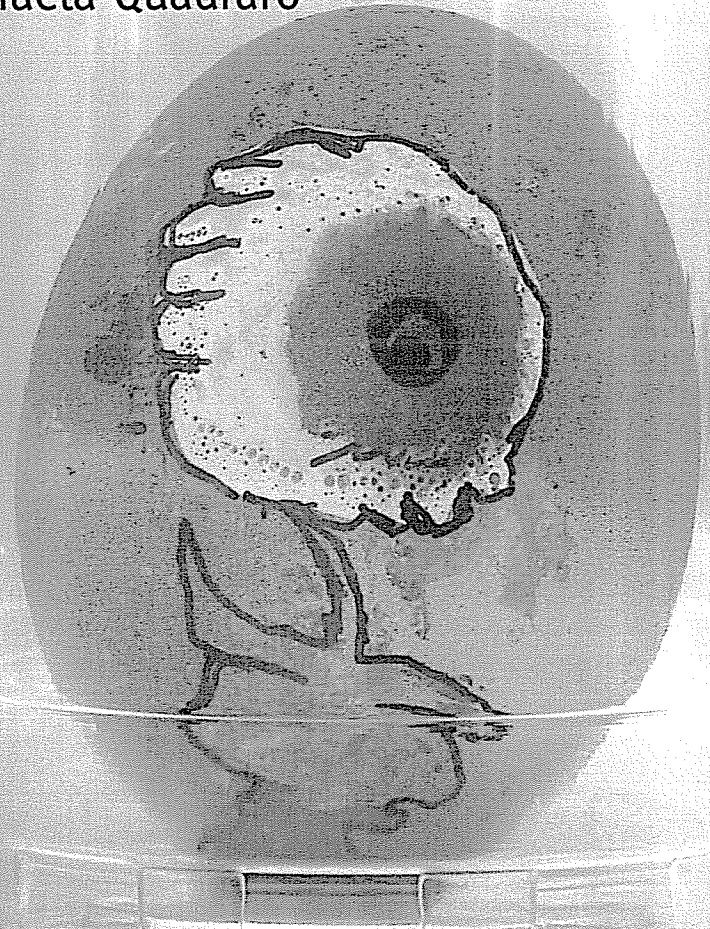
ASHGATE

ASHGATE

The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro



MeLa – *European Museums in an age of migrations* is a four year long Research Project (March 2011–February 2015) funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme within the Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities Sector (SSH-2010-5.2.2, Grant Agreement n° 266757). MeLa is an interdisciplinary programme aimed at analysing the role of museums in the contemporary multi-cultural context, characterized by an augmented migration of people and ideas, and at identifying innovative practices and strategies in order to foster their evolution.

The research activities developed by the MeLa Project are fostered by the cooperation of nine European Partners, and articulated through distinct Research Fields.

RF01: Museums and Identity in History and Contemporaneity

examines the historical and contemporary relationships between museums, places and identities in Europe and the effects of migrations on museum practices.

RF02: Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernity and Museum Practices

transforms the question of memory into an unfolding cultural and historical problematic, in order to promote new critical and practical perspectives.

RF03: Network of Museums, Libraries and Public Cultural Institutions

investigates coordination strategies between museums, libraries and public cultural institutions in relation to European cultural and scientific heritage, migration and integration.

RF04: Curatorial and Artistic Research

explores the work of artists and curators on and with issues of migration, as well as the role of museums and galleries exhibiting this work and disseminating knowledge.

RF05: Exhibition Design, Technology of Representation and Experimental Actions

investigates and experiments innovative communication tools, ICT potentialities, user centred approaches, and the role of architecture and design for the contemporary museum.

RF06: Envisioning 21st Century Museums

fosters theoretical, methodological and operative contributions to the interpretation of diversities and commonalities within European cultural heritage, and proposes enhanced practices for the mission and design of museums in the contemporary multicultural society.

Partners and principal investigators:

Luca Basso Peressut (Project Coordinator), Gennaro Postiglione, Politecnico di Milano, Italy
Marco Sacco, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Italy
Bartomeu Mari, MACBA – Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Spain
Fabienne Galangau, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, France
Ruth Noack, The Royal College of Art, United Kingdom
Perla Innocenti, University of Glasgow, United Kingdom
Jamie Allen, Jacob Back, Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design, Denmark
Christopher Whitehead, Rhiannon Mason, Newcastle University, United Kingdom
Iain Chambers, 'L'Orientale', University of Naples, Italy
www.mela-project.eu



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
European Research Area



Funded under Socio-economic Sciences & Humanities

Legal notice

The views expressed here are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.

The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by

IAIN CHAMBERS, ALESSANDRA DE ANGELIS,
CELESTE IANNICIELLO, MARIANGELA ORABONA
AND MICHAELA QUADRARO
Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

ASHGATE

© Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro 2014

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the editors of this work.

Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Wey Court East
Union Road
Farnham
Surrey, GU9 7PT
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
110 Cherry Street
Suite 3-1
Burlington, VT 05401-3818
USA

www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

The Library of Congress has cataloged the printed edition as follows:

The postcolonial museum : the arts of memory and the pressures of history / by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona, Michaela Quadraro.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4724-1567-7 (hardback) – ISBN 978-1-4724-1568-4 (ebook) –

ISBN 978-1-4724-1569-1 (epub) 1. Museums – Social aspects. 2. Postcolonialism – Social aspects. 3. Collective memory – Social aspects. 4. Museums and community.

I. Chambers, Iain, editor of compilation.

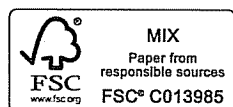
AM7.P59 2014
069–dc23

2013033639

ISBN 9781472415677 (hbk)

ISBN 9781472415684 (ebk – PDF)

ISBN 9781472415691 (ebk – ePUB)



Printed in the United Kingdom by Henry Ling Limited,
at the Dorset Press, Dorchester, DT1 1HD

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix

Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality <i>Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro</i>	1
--	---

PART I: GLOBAL MIGRATIONS, TRANSCULTURAL HERITAGE

1 A Museum Without Objects <i>Françoise Vergès</i>	25
2 Decolonising National Museums of Ethnography in Europe: Exposing and Reshaping Colonial Heritage (2000–2012) <i>Felicity Bodenstern and Camilla Pagani</i>	39
3 Colonial Spaces, Postcolonial Narratives: The Exhibitionary Landscape of Fort Cochin in India <i>Neelima Jeychandran</i>	51
4 Ethnographic Museums: From Colonial Exposition to Intercultural Dialogue <i>Fabienne Boursiquot</i>	63

PART II: ARTISTIC INCURSIONS IN SPACE AND TIME

5 'There is Not Yet a World' <i>Ebadur Rahman</i>	75
6 The Artist as Interlocutor and the Labour of Memory <i>Mihaela Brebenel, Christopher Collier and Joanna Figiel</i>	89

- 7 Performance in the Museum Space (for a Wandering Society) 99
Margherita Parati

PART III: DISORIENTING THE MUSEUM

- 8 *Museo Diffuso*: Performing Memory in Public Spaces 111
Viviana Gravano
- 9 Mining the Museum in an Age of Migration 125
Anne Ring Petersen
- 10 Blurring History: The Central European Museum and the Schizophrenia of Capital 137
Ivan Jurica
- 11 The Limits to Institutional Change: Organisational Roles and Roots 147
Peggy Levitt

PART IV: REPRESENTATION AND BEYOND

- 12 The Incurable Image: Curation and Repetition on a Tri-continental Scene 161
Tarek Elhaik
- 13 The Postcolonial 'Exhibitionary Complex': The Role of the International Expo in Migrating and Multicultural Societies 175
Stefania Zuliani
- 14 Orientalism and the Politics of Contemporary Art Exhibitions 185
Alessandra Marino
- 15 What Museum for Africa? 195
Itala Vivan

PART V: FUTURE MEMORIES, ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVES

- 16 *Egyptian Chemistry*: From Postcolonial to Post-humanist Matters 209
Ursula Biemann
- 17 'The Lived Moment': New Aesthetics for Migrant Recollection 219
Peter Leese
- 18 Coding/Decoding the Archive 229
David Gauthier and Erin La Cour
- Afterword: After the Museum 241
Iain Chambers
- Index* 247

Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality

Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona
and Michaela Quadraro

Postcolonial art is intimately linked to globalisation – that is, to a critical reflection on the planetary conditions of artistic production, circulation and reception. This implies focusing on the interweaving of the geographical, cultural, historical and economic contexts in which art takes place. The relationship between globalisation and art, as Okwi Enwezor observes, conceived and institutionalised by the European history of modern art in terms of separation or simply negation, here acquires fundamental importance (Enwezor 2003). It represents both the premise through which the relationship between art and the postcolonial can be conceptualised, and the matrix that helps to convey the cultural and political value of this relationship, together with its significance as a *disruptive encounter*. Far from being lost in the sterile and abstract, yet provincial, mirror of self-referentiality masked as universalism – with the implicit claim of the autonomy and independence of art from other cultural forms and activities – postcolonial art is deeply and consciously embedded in historicity, globalisation and social discourse. On one hand, it reminds us of how power is organic to the constitution of the diverse relations and asymmetries that shape our postcolonial world, and hence of how ‘bringing contemporary art into the geopolitical framework that defines global relations offers a perspicacious view of the postcolonial constellation’ (Enwezor 2003, 58). On the other hand, postcolonial art also shows how aesthetics today presents itself as an incisive critical instance. Postcolonial art proposes new paradigms of both signification and subjectivation, offering alternative interpretative tools that promote a reconfiguration of a planetary reality.

Analysing the link between modernity and this global reality, we can say that globalisation can be understood as the planetary ‘expansion of trade and its grip on the totality of natural resources, of human production, in a word of living in its entirety’ (Mbembe 2003). It was inaugurated by the Occident through a violent process of expropriation, appropriation and an exasperated defence of property, spread globally through capitalism and its imperialist extension. This is a political economy that is deeply rooted in, and sustained by, the humanist, rationalist, colonialist and nationalist culture of the West. The central phenomenon of modernity, born in a historical exercise of power, was fed by the religion of ‘progress’ and the racist ideology of ‘white supremacy’ imposing itself for centuries as a universal ontological category through the institutions of laws,

Chapter 16

Egyptian Chemistry: From Postcolonial to Post-humanist Matters

Ursula Biemann

Egyptian Chemistry has involved making a radical break with my long-term investigation of migratory systems. The move from a postcolonial to a post-humanist practice is by no means simply an expansion, embracing a larger, more universal scope. On the contrary, it involves a fundamental shift in the metaphysical understanding of how differences come to matter. In the case of *Egyptian Chemistry*, it became a voyage into molecular structures.

The question of how reality constitutes itself, how things materialise, and specifically what role an artist can play in this, has been on my agenda for years. I have engaged with a number of tools that could help me understand the dynamics of discursive practices in the material world. A crucial instrument in this investigation has been feminist theory, deeply influenced by postcolonial and race theory, which introduced the notion of performativity as a way to rethink the production of differences and boundaries, both in terms of identity and geography. A number of cultural geographers have contested the view of space as a neutral backdrop against which events unfold. First and foremost was Henri Lefebvre, who insisted that space and society are mutually constituted and that space is an agent of change, playing an active role in the unfolding of events. All this required a rethinking of how reality can be imagined without fixed coordinates.

The Spatialisation of Migration

These theoretical concerns were at the heart of *Sahara Chronicle*, a video-research project on the clandestine transit-migration across the Sahara which I conducted during 2006–2009. For the most part, the migrants in question are from West Africa, and use the Sahel zone and the Maghreb as a transit space to reach the Mediterranean. In a number of field trips to Morocco, Niger, Libya, Mauritania and Senegal, I trailed the hotspots, documenting their vast migration system. This ensemble of videos does not pursue a notion of absolute space as rendered in maps with grids that locate naturally bounded features such as land or a people. Such a form of representation turns a dynamic temporal process into real, physical things inside a named container. *Sahara Chronicle*, on the contrary, is a videocartography project that maps the correlation between economic factors,

historical conditions, spatial and epistemological practices, cultural specificities and ecological developments, all of which play into this particular kind of mobility in the Sahara. Attention was focused on Agadez in the heart of Niger, which is the capital of the Tuareg and an important traffic node for migration toward Libya and Algeria. The unresolved forceful division of Tuareg territories, now redistributed among five nations, has forced them into a transnational existence by definition. They practise a very fluid kind of unbounded space that clashes with the laws of land ownership of the occupying powers. The Tuareg rebellion for independence in the 1990s was directly linked to the uranium mining that had been going on in their territory without their benefiting from the wealth generated. So they sought alternative economic opportunities and began to traffic in migrants.

Sahara Chronicle works with a notion of spatialisation as a never-ending, power-laced process engaged in by a wide variety of actors – water bearers, smugglers, Red Crescent personnel, rebel leaders, drone surveillance sensors, refugees, fishermen and so on. My approach to migration in this and other works is that of an intertwined system of great agency, topographic knowledge and connectivity that together generate migratory space. I use the video camera as a cognitive tool to write counter-geographies, geographies which, rather than affirming and reinforcing control regimes of borders and mobility, document the ways in which people subvert and transgress borders and obstacles that have been imposed on them. I favour a systemic approach to migration over one grounded in the migratory experience per se.

The installation is a direct reflection of these aesthetic strategies in that the videos are exhibited simultaneously as an arrangement in the museum space, some on monitors, some projected. So there is a temporal dimension of synchronicity as well. With its loose interconnectedness and its widespread geography, *Sahara Chronicle* mirrors the migration network itself. It does not aim to construct a homogenous, overarching, contemporary narrative of a phenomenon that has long roots in colonial Africa and is extremely diverse and fragile in its present social organisation and human experience. No authorial voice, or any other narrative device, is used to link the carefully chosen scenes together. The installation is an account of the spatial practice of migration by means of logistic nodes, border passages, places of hiding, regrouping, detention and so on. The space in between these specific sites is only brought together in the minds of the viewers. Implicating such minds in the geographic production, as it were, is a way of using them as a psycho-social resource to complete and extend the work. This, and a number of previous videos I have made, are all based on the premise that reality is something that comes into being through the movement of people and that this is how space unfolds and becomes meaningful. I do this by using investigative fieldwork as an artistic practice so that it becomes part of the process of reality-making and world-making.

I use the term 'counter-geography' to describe the imaging of the subversive practices of space and mobility of clandestine migrants, weaving a complementary narrative to the classic media representation of illegal migrants. The latter images

tend to focus on surveillance and containment, mostly pointing the camera at failed attempts to flee. My videos fill a representative vacuum left by classic media images. Fieldwork is central in my performative understanding of artistic practice, for it takes into account the fact that knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing, but from a direct material engagement with the world. That is how artistic practices inscribe themselves in the processes of materialisation that are going on all around. That is how I inscribe myself in the space of mobility which I document.

The Performativity of Definition

This whole question of how things materialise is tremendously important if one aspires to have any sort of impact on the world. How do matter and meaning intertwine? This elementary question is relevant to institutionalisations of all kind, including museums. Strangely enough, quantum physics can help with this question, for it takes the notion of performativity to a whole different level. For quantum theorists too, reality is not something pre-existing 'out there', it comes into being by measurement – that is, through attempts at defining boundaries and properties. Quantum physics asserts that the properties of an object are indeterminate *before* its measurement. It is not that we do not *know* the object before that moment, but only once it has been measured is it clear whether it is particle or wave, or more remarkably, both particle *and* wave. Indeterminacy is a state that is difficult to grasp and actually quite disturbing. Only in the instant of observation is it identified as either a particle, in which case it has weight and is positioned in space and time, or a wave, and thus unlocatable, pure energy. The indeterminacy is resolved by the process of measurement with all its specificities, human, technological, institutional and so on. It is this performative moment that generates matter through a differentiating act. The object observed is inseparable from the agencies of observation, and the two intra-actively constitute each other in making worlds. This is how we can be part of the world in its differential becoming. This is not the same as participatory observation – although this too is a form of quantum behaviour – nor as saying that context determines perception and hence the meaning of an object, as in an institutional critique which assumes that all you have to do is recontextualise an object for its meaning to change. Quantum theory demolishes any claim that we can have a knowledge *of* the world, from above and outside, and tells us that there can only be knowing as part of being. It is not simply an epistemological understanding, but also an ontological one. This is how reality constitutes itself, both materially and discursively.

By the same token, it is not enough to put the observer/knower back in the picture and merely acknowledge our situatedness – as feminist theory proposed by introducing a positioned epistemology to counter a universalising humanism. It goes a step further by taking account of the fact that we are part of the world's differential becoming. Difference *is* what matters, as theoretical particle physicist

Karen Barad writes in her insightful book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). Difference is the process of mattering. The world articulates itself differently. That is how one part of the world makes itself known to another part of the world. Part of the world becomes bounded and propertied in its emergent intelligibility to another part of the world. This process generates complementarity. Measurement produces determinate values for the measured quantity, leaving the complementary quantities indeterminate. We are constantly producing a world, half of which remains invisible. What matters is marked off from that which is excluded from mattering, but not once and for all. Exclusions constitute an open space of agency, they are the changing conditions of possibilities. So far, critical social theories have mainly focused on the power relations that produce exclusions with the aim of reintroducing and strengthening the invisible complementarity, much as I have done with videos that place female assembly workers or clandestine migrants back in the picture – to bring the invisible into visibility. Everyone can see the utility of this strategy: it does something concrete, has a defined purpose, has an effectiveness built into it. But given the fact that the world continually articulates itself differently, there is no doubt that it is also a Sisyphean labour.

Quantum behaviour helps us understand what knowledge does and how it relates to being. It demonstrates that practices of knowing and being are mutually implicated, not isolated entities. And furthermore, knowing is not a human privilege. As Barad argues, every living thing able to distinguish between self and the environment of which it is a part, by recognising danger, food, shelter and so on, in order to survive, is involved in this process of mattering. The performative humanist impulse to categorise, differentiate and study has created hard boundaries of demarcation, which have kept large parts of the world from mattering 'in a certain way'.

The museum is not simply a place to store, represent and exhibit previously existing facts and artefacts on difference, it is the apparatus through which difference comes into being. The greatest problem the museum faces in postcolonial times is not a matter of inclusion or exclusion, but the fact that the museum itself is the discursive-material apparatus through which this very distinction matters (through criteria, typologies, by creating differentiability, judgement). The museum is a boundary-drawing device. More importantly, perhaps, the material-discursive apparatus of the museum not only interprets what has already materialised, but sets the criteria for the conditions of future possibilities. Quantum physics teaches us that the limitation is not imposed by the actual information the observer has extracted about the object of interest, but lies in the information that could in principle be extracted within the constraints established by the preparation. The mere fact that things become distinguishable creates possibilities of definition.

So, to challenge traditional epistemology, we cannot merely welcome females, slaves, animals and other dispossessed others into the field of the knowers from which they have been excluded. In any case, this self-empowered process has been going on for quite some time already, and now a more radical post-humanist vision is needed. The 'postcolony' is neither a place nor a time period, but first

and foremost a critical engagement with humanist principles. The postcolonial museum is one that challenges Humanism. This goes beyond a critique of Eurocentrism to propose one that fundamentally rethinks the nature–culture dynamics and the way mind and matter interrelate, not as two separate units, but from within, in a molecular alliance, so to speak.

Egyptian Chemistry: A Reconfiguration on a Molecular Level

Let me now turn to *Egyptian Chemistry* (2012), a new video research-creation.¹ The project basically explores the chemistry and agro-ecology of the Nile. Like *Sahara Chronicle*, it is a composite work, made up of a number of videos. With *Egyptian Chemistry*, I have pursued my effort to dislocate the container model of space as well as the spatialisation of time as a simple continuum. In addition, I engage here in a third relation that now needs reconsideration: the mind–matter dynamic. For this reason, I turned to quantum physics and to other proliferating theories in the range of speculative realism and relational ontologies, such as Bruno Latour's actor–network scheme, and all sorts of emerging theories that plead for the democracy of all actors, human and non-human. Now that the boundaries of gender and ethnicity, as well as those between humans and technology, have been rigorously dismantled, we are face to face with the last stronghold of difference that separates us humans from the world. I see an interest, and indeed a certain urgency, in seriously engaging my artistic production – my fieldwork, signifying practice, organising system, my whole cosmology – with the possibility of overcoming this fictitious boundary that sets us apart as subjects.

Egyptian Chemistry explores the hybrid water ecologies of Egypt, and the Nile in particular, to probe transformations that take place from within. Egypt is a hydraulic civilisation. Egyptians have long built large-scale engineering projects like dams and canals, and launched land reclamation ventures on a literally pharaonic scale in order to reallocate water across time and space for communities and entire ecosystems. There is almost a mythical dimension to the impact of the High Dam on the fate of Egypt. When I first came to Aswan, the scenery was eerie. The naked concrete structure looked like a spaceship crashed into the river valley. Driven deep into the ground and partially submerged, it backs up the water coming from Ethiopia. The High Dam is a time barrier. It has changed floods, seasons, crops and species. The planetary positioning is one of discontinuity.

It has been clear to every president since Anwar Abdel Nasser that to be in power in Egypt, you need to be in control of water. This has prompted a huge land redistribution campaign in favour of the peasants. In the 1990s, under the

¹ *Egyptian Chemistry* was first exhibited in a smaller version at Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum in November 2012, and complete at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein in March 2013.



Figure 16.1 Video still from Ursula Biemann, *Egyptian Chemistry*, 2012. Earth sampling at Toshka, a giant land reclamation project on the Upper Nile

neo-liberal rule of Mubarak, local food, and particularly wheat production, which is a staple for millions, was aggressively replaced by export crops cultivated by large-scale agro-industries. Nasser's land reform was systematically dismantled.

Hydraulic infrastructures are absolutely vital for the national food supply since there is virtually no rainfall in this country. These built environments – these hydro-engineering projects – are an expression of how governments conceive of 'nature' and place it at the service of society; they embody particular ecological paradigms. Any dam, barrage or irrigation canal paves the way for the commodification of water. By processing and facilitating water, it automatically becomes something that can be charged for. Egyptian peasants take it for granted that in their lush Nile Valley, farmland comes with the appropriate amount of water. And for the time being, Egypt has not proceeded to privatise water, although large amounts of Nile water are diverted to service developments for industrial agriculture in the desert.

Toshka (Figure 16.1) is one of these colossal development projects, drawing water from Lake Nasser into a desert depression. Sterile lands, out of bounds for human life, are turned into field labs for testing new ways of being human. Parallel valleys, desert colonies and artificial food production have manufactured a world in which science is programmed to overcome nature, turning desert dust into soggy fertility.

Egypt's topography is changing. Extensive irrigation is drawing heavily on the underground aquifers, causing the Nile Delta to sink at the rate of a centimetre a year. Among the futuristic land reclamation ventures, there is a pioneering integrated seawater agriculture project on the Red Sea called New Nile Co. Apart from food

production, the project will also attempt to build up biomass with mangroves and other seawater plants to compensate for the dwindling ground, which will leave the delta exposed to rising sea levels. More importantly, the ecology of the Nile has changed due to the High Dam and a series of barrages built in the last century. These structures have put an end to the migration of fish from Ethiopia through the Mediterranean into the Atlantic and back. High-quality species suited to fast-running currents have disappeared and made room for the large, lazy tilapia. And, as a result of the diminished supply of oxygen that used to speed up their anaerobic decay, organic pollutants have now turned into biochemical combat units infecting pools and reaching land through the billions of irrigation canals. All these changes reconfigure Egypt on a molecular level.

Egyptian Chemistry explores the interaction between hydraulic, chemical, natural and human forces which together form the hybrid ecologies of Egypt. Inscribed in these Egyptian hydraulic agro-ecologies are countless histories – those of modernisation, continuous land reforms, artificial fertilisation, insect migration, peasant activism. These historiographies of water culture and politics have a decentralising impact, and resist, to some extent, the neo-liberal agro-management models which have prevailed in the last fifteen years. Sidelined by neo-liberal government policies affecting credit lines, fertiliser and water supplies, small farming in the Nile Valley has become unprofitable and the young generation has moved to the cities seeking work. The urban centres where the revolution broke out in January 2011 were full of people from the villages who had experienced a continuous aggravation of their livelihood. The revolution has unleashed new visions and initiatives, in particular the desire for non-governmental organisation and visionary sustainable projects. I went deep into the Delta to meet some of the peasants who have recently begun to organise themselves into unions. Under Mubarak, unionising was prohibited, so I was curious to hear what their main concerns were. Shahinda Makal is a leading activist in their struggle.

Before being tamed by the engineers, the Nile was more generous and democratic. With every high flood, it spread its fertilising mud evenly over the entire Nile Valley. Then, with the introduction of hydraulic structures, fertilisers became chemical, marketable, and hence subject to the political mechanism of agricultural subsidies: a matter of the social sphere.

It is these pivotal sites where natural and social processes intersect that are of most interest to me. We take it for granted that scientific and engineering efforts are generally directed toward making nature a better and more efficient resource for the human species. The focus is understandably on human achievement. But if we see past such anthropocentric visions, we have to admit that indeed, humans have used the force of the Nile, but so have lazy fish, suspended pollutants, ammonium nitrate, cement factories and wheat crops, all of which have their say in the video. The river has to be thought of as a hybrid interactive system that has always been organic, technological and social all at once. The Nile is like a machine with enormous potential natural agency – electric, genetic, chemical, thermal – a comprehensive expression of nature's capacity to produce energy.



Figure 16.2 Video still from Ursula Biemann, *Egyptian Chemistry*, 2012. Water sampling in the Nile Delta

This approach sees human agency as one among many actors in the generation of a situation, some of which are signifying, others not. A particularly interesting site in this respect is the hydraulic model of a section of the Nile near Asiut where a new dam is to be built. The physical model is the size of a giant factory floor and is an exact reproduction of the Nile bed over a stretch of 3 kilometres. It is used to test the river's behaviour when obstructed by hydraulic architectures. The engineers drop paper scraps from the high ceiling down onto the running water, and the serial photographs of the operation reveal the flow patterns of the river so that the structures can be adjusted accordingly. The model acts as the temporary interface between water and mind, between hydraulic force and mathematics. Together they form a hybrid consciousness.

As a coalescing agent interacting with so many vital functions, water vigorously shapes Egyptian life. But it is *not* enough to speak about the aesthetics of a hydraulic culture simply as a set of recurring spatial and infrastructural motifs, we have to consider water – this indispensable primary substance, this ur-liquid – as a dominant structure of experience that passes through the very molecules of a historical reality. In conjunction with hydraulic technologies, water is not only deeply transformative, it generates a whole range of new products. Altered water chemistry changes soil quality and entire agro-ecologies, thus shaping land management, urbanisation, food supply chains and other collective organisations such as farmers' unions and revolutions. The bonds between all these components are neither causal nor simply economic. The ontology behind *Egyptian Chemistry* is that they form into dynamic interactive clusters equipped with agency where desert developers and tiny water pollutants unfold equally effective actions.

The art project is based on field research where water samples were taken at 16 locations along the Nile and around the Delta wetlands (Figure 16.2). Their chemistry was probed and the locations documented in their socio-ecological configuration. Additionally, in a series of fairly short videos, *Egyptian Chemistry* brings the knowledge from multiple sources – from atmospheric physics to hydraulic modelling, peasant activism, agro-science, metaphysics and ecology – into a single forum, forming an epistemogram or a sort of epistemological cartography.

This more wholesome approach goes back to an ensemble of practices encompassing chemical, biological, metallurgical and philosophical dimensions, represented by the original name Al Khemia, long before the epistemological division into disciplines and subdisciplines set in. Al Khemia happened to be the ancient word for Egypt, meaning 'the Black Land', possibly due to the muddy Nile floods periodically fertilising the land. The term alludes to the vision that, before anything else, the earth is a mighty chemical body where the crackling noise of the forming and breaking of molecular bonds can be heard at all times.

Metachemistry as Organising Principle

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the project does not use geography as a co-ordinating principle, it draws on metachemistry as a theory that explains the transformation of matter in its molecular structure. In chemistry, substances

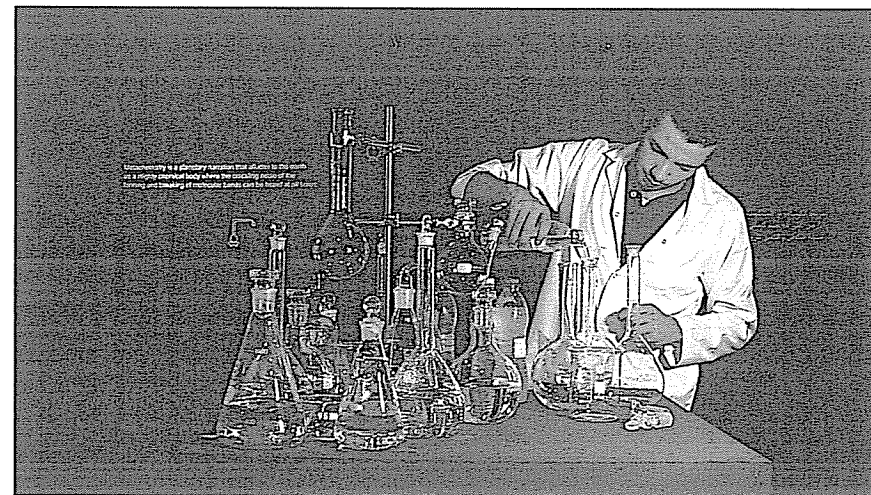


Figure 16.3 Video still from Ursula Biemann, *Egyptian Chemistry*, 2012. Water chemistry laboratory in art installation, Contemporary Art Forum, Alexandria

are characterised entirely by their willingness to bond and transform into new compounds. In a highly selective disposition, molecular bonds are constantly forming or breaking, inducing radical shifts in the identity of matter, relentlessly reworking the planetary composition. Chemistry is a theory of internal relations, a recursive system where no class is defined in isolation. Everything that is, results from previous reactions. There is no beginning, only chemical insiders and their sequential genealogies.

The core motif in *Egyptian Chemistry* is the collection of water samples at specific sites along the Nile, some of which are rural, some industrial, others urban. Another video, directly related to the first one, documents the same young Egyptian, this time in a white coat, as he brings the Nile water samples into the installation of *Egyptian Chemistry* at the Contemporary Art Forum in Alexandria, where he rebottles them into chemistry lab glasses (Figure 16.3).

Egyptian Chemistry is almost an attempt to invent videographically a new form of materialist universality, one that is fragile, plural, ragged, full of holes, yet somehow coalesced by the muddy oneness of the planet itself. This new proposition works along the lines of scientific naturalism, the methodologies of the social sciences, particularly ethnography, but also with poetry, aesthetics and the mythic imagination. I am not primarily focusing on strategies of representation. I have come to realise that if we only culturalise the discourse in terms of the physical and chemical transformations our planet is currently undergoing by prioritising meaning and representation, we fail to address a deeper problem. For if we are to speak about the non-human world – weather patterns, organic pollutants, copper atoms – it will not suffice to deploy an anthropocentric discourse. Not everything comes into being through human intention, we need to examine the ways in which human and non-human realities emerge together in a variety of formations. Rather than through a particular set of criteria, this is more likely to happen through the hybrid consciousness engendered by the assemblage of technological, social and natural stuff, where some elements signify, others do not. Metachemistry grasps this turbulent instance of physical and epistemic change and propels us into a slightly altered dimension that can only be invoked mythically through space travel, time barriers and the interbiospheric mobility of species.

References

- Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bernal, Andrés and Edgar E. Daza. 2010. 'On the Epistemological and Ontological Status of Chemical Relations'. *HYLE – International Journal for Philosophy of Chemistry* 16(2): 80–103.
- Sjöström, Jesper. 2007. 'The Discourse of Chemistry (and Beyond)'. *HYLE – International Journal for Philosophy of Chemistry* 13(2): 83–97.