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crossroads*

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Unsettled Temporalities: Curatorial practice at a crossroads

Olga Fernández López

- 1 To write a review at the beginning of 2020 is an intricate task. In a matter of weeks, most debates have become suddenly obsolete and soon we will need to face a very different set of questions. Ironically, the books published last year that presented round figures assessments can now be read as having involuntarily anticipated the end of a cycle. This conclusion is not metaphorical -the usual convention in the calendars-, but a decisive breakpoint that is going to reshape the world as we know it. Just a few months ago, 2019 seemed a relevant moment to evaluate the deep transformations that the art world had undergone since 1989 in the framework of post-bipolar and post-colonial geopolitics. It also seemed appropriate to open new perspectives regarding our globalised present. What these analyses could not foresee was a future in which museums and art institutions were going to be shut down. The experience of the last decades is the starting point of two books with different scope and ambitions, *Utopian Display: Geopolitiche Curatoriali*, published by the Milan Academy of Fine Arts, and *Curating After the Global: Roadmaps for the Present*, a research collaboration between Luma Arles and the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. Both books are collective volumes that work with the suggestion that we may be facing a period of de-globalisation, with some provisos. Regarded from the West, its signs can be located in economic protectionism, anti-migration discourses, right-wing populism, and renewed cultural wars, although we could also think of them as symptoms of an authoritarian revolt coming from neoliberalism itself (with Sandro Medrazza) or as an inter-capitalist conflict of transnational blocs (with Vijay Prashad, in one of the articles in the second book). In this respect, one may wonder whether the asserted post-global condition is just a question posed from the viewpoint of the crisis of Western liberal democracies.
- 2 Considered from the lived experiences of the Global South, globophobia could be related to the effects of the further displacement and dispossession caused to the majority of the people living in this non-geographical site by permanent financial crisis and debt, transnational deregulations, and neocolonialism. However, the border

closures of the last weeks due to the pandemic have confirmed the stability of the nation-state world order. In the middle of this changing scenario, we will soon need to reflect on the responses that will come from the part of curators and institutions in the new cultural landscape.

- 3 The transformation of the art-world's map over the past decades was intimately connected to curatorial practices and contemporary art. In fact, both have been significant agents in the process of cultural and economic globalisation. In order to explore this relationship each book proposes a different approach. *Utopian Display: Geopolitiche Curatoriali* examines the contradictions, possibilities and limits of curatorial practice in relation to the postcolonial enlargement of art's geographies. *Curating After the Global: Roadmaps for the Present* adopts a sense of presentness and positions itself in an "after-the-global" condition that tries to bypass the disjunctive between alter-globalisation (identified with local models of resistance) and de-globalisation (identified with the protectionist turn). Between balance and urgency, both define their structures along the same lines of thought: institutional challenges, contemporary debates on the internationalization of art, as well as histories and memories of exhibitions.
- 4 Art institutions have been a major concern in the debates of these past decades. The growing cuts that have affected many museums and art centres, along with the entanglement between neoliberal demands, cultural and tourist industries, and art institutions have significantly transformed the latter, to the extent that their previous social function has been undergoing a deep crisis. In the face of these changes, the demand to *re-imagine museums* as democratic projects is shared by the majority of the articles dealing with this issue. Each book seems to focus on a different but complementary line of action for this re-democratisation, either to consider museums as civic spaces, with examples taken mainly from non-Western contexts (*Utopian Display: Geopolitiche Curatoriali*) or to establish self-institutions and context-responsive curating projects (*Curating After the Global*). The latter in particular emphasises cases taken from the French context in relation to the Arles venue where part of the conferences took place. In both books there is a variety of expressions, such as self-expropriated museum, museum in exile, re-imagination of institutional time, educational institution, "transvestite" museum, open forum, radical hospitality, or civil domain. They all serve as points of entry to an aspirational new institutionality based on practices of des-identification, de-canonisation, and de-colonisation, as well as on the establishment of alliances of solidary or interdependent – and therefore, occasionally agonistic – local institutional formations, in which museums are just one type of agent among others.
- 5 This new institutionality may be understood as a way to offer local responses to globalised problems. However, we should bear in mind that the disparity of contexts determines the challenges that institutional organisations as well as collective and individual agents need to confront. In this regard, a case-by-case assessment of past and present contemporary art and curatorial practices proves that quantitative internationalisation has not necessarily transformed the power structures of the geo-artistic field. This point of view is particularly present in *Utopian Display: Geopolitiche Curatoriali*, a book in which the voice of highly influential curators, such as Gerardo Mosquera, Vasif Kortun, or WHW, speak from the experience of a group of contemporaries that was instrumental in both the establishment and the critique of

art's globalised condition. The underlying double argument that problematizes the promised utopia of an expanded map of the arts is that globalisation is only possible in a world previously organised by colonialism, while a real de-colonisation is not possible in the framework of neoliberal politics. The acknowledgment of this crux is precisely where *Curating After the Global* tries to place its cases. The route for (un)becoming global or for cultural de-colonisation, following some of the books' expressions, is conveyed through the presentation of Southern contemporary artistic proposals. Going beyond the notion that the Global South (including the various Souths within the West) is in a state of permanent "lack", these curatorial projects are presented as a resource that connects traditions and memories of solidarity and resistance, such as pan-africanism, feminism, communalism, or transmediterranean modernism, with a potential yet-to-come. However, we need to be aware that, in spite of the editors' undoubtedly good intentions and the relevance of the examples, this type of publication ends up fetishizing Southern experiences, through projects whose existence is due only to the hard material conditions in which they take place, untranslatable, and unwanted for Westernised frameworks. From this perspective it seems as though the exoticizing process currently underway has been transferred from the former ethnographic gaze towards the resilience to the effects of colonisation and neoliberalism. In this process Southerners remain entrapped in the paradoxical condition of being subjects and objects of their enunciation site.

- 6 A good example of how to negotiate this unstable position is *Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe*, a compendium of essays written by Zdenka Badovinac from 1998 to 2018, published by Independent Curators International. In this book the Slovenian curator reflects on the modes in which the notion of "universal localness", which she opposes to "local universality", can be personified, collectivised, and represented. The book helps to understand the challenges posed to post-socialist European artists and institutions during the expansion of cultural and economic globalisation. The menace of being homogenised under a flat East European art identity and of being read from the viewpoint of the master narratives of Western art was resisted effectively by way of exhibitions and sustained discussions on the role of contemporary art museums in relation to the antagonisms that exist between the local and the global. Key to Badovinac's approach is the production of a context from where to speak. This task involves the notion of self-historicization or singular historicization, a means to provide the possibility of a narrative (or a diversity of narratives) for the local histories, which are often in a fragile state of appearing and disappearing. According to the author, when history is interrupted, artworks, which are simultaneously historical objects, can be used as instruments of historicization and regain the social function that is lost when they enter in the museum. Exhibitions, therefore, turn out to be preferential sites in which art can perform its own historicization and resist imposed narratives. Badovinac has extensively researched the specific modernisms developed in the area as well as the possibility that they should become a reservoir for the memory of collective experiences, which the title of the book, "Comradeship", aims to recuperate. In this regard, she also advocates the connection with different world agents and institutions affected by shared urgencies, a call for solidarity that is also present in *Curating After the Global*.
- 7 The need to reflect the history of exhibition(s) is not only present in the three abovementioned books, but it is the main objective of two other volumes published in 2019, *Theater, Garden, Bestiary: A Materialist History of Exhibitions*, the outcome of a

research project lead by two Swiss Art Universities, and *Off(f) Our Times: Curatorial Anachronics*, a selection of texts in relation to a two-part conference in Oslo and the Cultures of the Curatorial program in Leipzig. Both books interrelate the history of exhibition(s) and contemporaneity and both introduce artistic projects as another mode of performing research. Contrary to the geographical extension provided by the first two books, most of the cases examined in these volumes come from the Western context, a fact that urges a question about what can be considered historical.

- 8 *Theater, Garden, Bestiary: A Materialist History of Exhibitions* is outlined as an investigation that expands Tony Bennett's notion of exhibitionary complex. This framework gives a certain unity to the different articles, even if its diversity shadows the possibility of establishing a strong hypothesis. However, the exploration of the historical material conditions that made possible the public presentation of artistic and natural objects while reciprocally contributing to the shaping of modernity is highly persuasive. The project drafts an arch that links diverse Western spatial configurations that have determined the construction of the modern subject/spectator and the social and epistemological positions of exhibited objects. In this way, the texts help examine the origins of some questions presented in the previously commented books. Key to the editors' proposal is the correlation of the modern experience of art and the excavation of its own structures of presentation. In the same fashion, the book modifies its object of study by inserting itself in this archaeological process. This "quantum" premise is at the core of *Off(f) Our Times: Curatorial Anachronics*, a compilation that examines the histories of various exhibitions through the lens of what has been coined as *the curatorial* in the last decade. This approach distinguishes exhibition-making, curating, and the curatorial. The latter is understood as a post-representational practice that enables a situation or event of knowledge, communality and experimentation. The book interprets a number of historical exhibitions under this discursive light, a move that allows the editors to emphasise the collaborative engagement qualities that are produced in every act of becoming public. The two books proceed in opposite directions: *Theater, Garden, Bestiary* looks at the past in order to understand the present and *Off(f) Our Times: Curatorial Anachronics* uses contemporary tools to look into the past.
- 9 Whereas the literature on curating in the early 2000s focused on the definition of contemporary curatorial practice, this last decade has seen a growing interest in histories and memories of exhibitions, as these five publications attest. This self-historicization shows the extent to which the curatorial field has gained in density and maturity. In the current state of affairs and in anticipation of the cultural landscape to come, the legacy of internationalism, solidarity, and communitarianism constitutes a source of experiences from which we can learn in the passage to an uncertain future.