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INDIGENOUS OR GLOBAL? THE POVERTY OF ART-HISTORICAL TERMINOLOGY

It is generally thought that 'culture' stands for bounded and structured, internally cohesive life worlds of ethnically and linguistically homogenous groups of people. Transculture, on the other hand, is seen as a transcendent term, associated with spatial mobility, multiple temporal flows, heterogeneity, and a rhizomaticity of socio-economic influences. At first glance, it would appear that 'indigenous', 'First Nations', or 'aboriginal' art refers to (a variety of) culturally homogenous practices, while 'global' art stands for the heterogeneity, multiplicity, and interpenetration of cross-geographical and cross-temporal flows, influences, and interactions. But is this really so? Is indigeneity synonymous with homogeneity? Does globalism imply an interpenetration of truly heterogeneous elements? Many artists self-identify as 'indigenous' for reasons that have changed surprisingly little since the times of overt colonialism, the violence of which was succinctly summed

up in the white-settler Australian artist Margaret Preston's infamous 1925 text. Here, Preston suggests that Australia should follow the 'bright' example of France, a country at "the head of all nations" because it knew how to avail itself of the art of "her native colonies and those of other countries".¹ Glorifying the early 20th century delusion of progress and 'national' prestige based on colonial theft, subjugation, in many cases also carnage, Preston's advice to white Australian settlers is to appropriate aboriginal art without "fear [of] demeaning themselves" as this is evidently the success recipe for strong 'national' art.²

In the second and third decades of the 21st century, self-identification as Indigenous draws a line not only between the previously ignored or expunged cultural heritages and their philosophical-spiritual worldviews and colonial atavisms; it also serves as a buffer against *covert* colonial practices. From the emptied global (yet residually Euro-American) position, globalisation treats all local cultures—or, in fact, cultures as such—in the same way the coloniser treats the colonised: as a population of curious creatures and habitats to be studied, and, where profitable, used. While traditional imperialist colonialism converted all values to the coloniser's values, global capitalist colonisation converts all values to the values of global capital: agglomeration, acceleration, and diversification of the processes of production, distribution, and obsolescence.³ 'Global' art is inseparable from neoliberalism, the biennial culture, large-scale international exhibitions, the rise of global auction markets, and the art market's skilful navigation of the deterritorialised

¹ Preston, M. (1925). The Indigenous Art of Australia. *Art in Australia*, March 1925, n.p.

² Preston, The Indigenous Art of Australia, n.p.

³ Žižek, S. (1997). Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism. *New Left Review*, 1 (Sept-Oct), 28-51; Nancy, J.-L. (2007). *The Creation of the World or Globalization*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

flows of capital against the ideological backdrop of smooth multiculturalism, where culture, custom, habitus, and ethos are simultaneously specific and generic.⁴ Global artists are thus asked to “speak the international language” but are often also “forced to speak of their own difference”.⁵ Or, as the global ‘provocateur’ Takashi Murakami flatly states: “in order to be a global success, artists should cite influences such as Warhol and Duchamp”.⁶

Indeed, if we look at the work of many artists considered global we will find both a connection with the contemporary Western canon, and a culturally specific variation. The connection with the Western canon is usually detectable enough to enable a smooth distribution of artworks without the need to rethink reception or invent new critical vocabularies. It is also different enough to represent a novel addition to the existing archive of the late 20th century, early 21st century practice of endless citation. For example, Wanagechi Mutu’s striking 2005 *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumor*, a collage of vagina-like openings and fleshly growths bursting out of a female head, calls to mind such works as Judy Chicago’s 1974-9 *Dinner Party*, a triangular installation with vagina-and-fruit-like place settings for thirty-nine mythological and historical women yet remains culturally, and medially, specific and distinct. Similarly, Do Ho Suh’s exquisite 2012 *Apartment* bears a semblance to Gordon Matta Clark’s 1974 *Bingo* yet clearly foregrounds the culturally different relationship of materiality to immateriality. Unlike Matta Clark’s, Suh’s interior building structures—

⁴ Žižek, Multiculturalism; Elkins, J. et al (Eds.). (2010). *Art and Globalization*. University Park: Penn State University Press..

⁵ Jones, C. A. (2017). *The Global Work of Art: World’s Fairs, Biennials and the Aesthetic Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 43.

⁶ Murakami, T. quoted in Jones, C.A. and Nelson S. (2015) Global Turns in US Art History. *Perspective. Actualité en histoire de l’art*, 2, 1-16; 10.

doors, stairs and landings—are made of silk, not of wood or concrete. But perhaps the most pertinent example for the argument I want to make in this short essay for an art practice that places engineered homogeneity in dialogue with standardised heterogeneity—which I will call ‘mondialising art’—are two specific works by Ai Weiwei and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, usually classified as ‘global’ and ‘indigenous’ artists, respectively.

Resonating with the critical work of Indigenous scholars of global importance, such as Winona La Duke and Daniel Heath Justice, as well as the work of native scientists like Gregory Cajete and Leroy Little Bear, Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of mondialisation is very different from the abstracted universality of globalisation. For Nancy, globalisation is synonymous with *ag-glome-ration*, a simultaneous stockpiling and reduction of the cultural, philosophical-spiritual dimensions of the globe to the glome. Derived from Latin for ‘ball of string’, the glome is no more than a four-dimensional sphere. The ‘world’, understood as that which never stops ‘worlding’—becoming itself through a perpetual process of transformation as well as sedimentation—is here replaced by the hegemony of global heterogeneity in homogeneity, or standardised difference. This is why Nancy insists on the distinction between globalisation and mondialisation despite the fact that, at first glance, this distinction may appear purely linguistic. As a process, the world (*monde*) is neither single nor final; it is factual, changeable and experiential. One participates in the facticity of the world by co-creating it. ‘Mondialisation’ retains both a ‘horizon’ and a ‘texture’, feel, and memory of this process, which is grounded in dwelling and praxis,⁷ rather than in mobility

⁷ Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, 27.

and/or incorporation—or subsumption—of different elements. But this is by no means to say that such a world is internally homogenous or pre-fabricated, despite the fact that it “symbolizes in itself with itself”.⁸ Globalisation, by contrast, is produced by an overarching economic-technological teleology leading to an un-inhabitable world or *l'immonde*—an ‘un-world’ of disorientation, social disintegration and existential confusion, which is why, for Nancy, the process of mondialisation is also, invariably, a process of struggle for justice.⁹

In many of his works, Ai Weiwei collapses tradition and contemporaneity, specificity and universality through the lens of contradictoriness characteristic both of Mao Zedong’s 1966-76 Cultural Revolution and the contemporary global condition. Ai performs what could be called ‘historical frottage’. Having studied traditional Chinese scrolls, landscape, calligraphy and ceramics, he draws attention to the violence of contradiction inherent in any homogenising process that seeks to envelop tradition in contemporaneity. In the 1994 *Coca-Cola Vase*, Ai alters an ancient Chinese vase from the Neolithic Age with Coca-Cola’s logo; in the 1995 *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, he documents himself dropping and destroying an urn from the Han Dynasty, a simultaneous reference to the Cultural Revolution (during which many ancient Chinese artifacts were destroyed for political purposes) and a statement against the unquestioning reverence for culturally fetishised objects. Both of these works point to the complexity of China’s as well as global postmodernity. The historical lack of Chinese homogeneity, combined with the vastness of the country, led Mao to formulate a theory of socio-cultural contradictoriness. In his 1937 treatise *On Contradiction*, he

⁸ Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, 53.

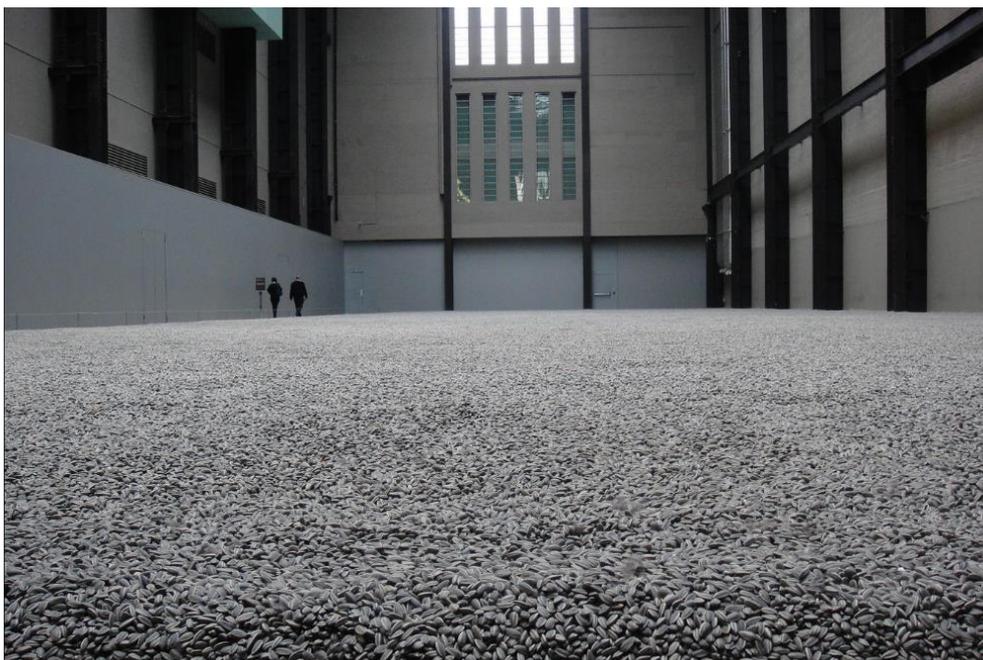
⁹ Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, 53.

explained the complexity of contradictions in Chinese society, first as the distinction between the principal contradiction and the secondary contradictions; then as the distinction between the principal aspect and the secondary aspect of each of the contradictions; and finally as the uneven development of all contradictions.¹⁰ This mode of thinking had a decisive influence on many Euro-American critics of postmodernity (as fragmentation, recombination yet homogenisation), most prominently Frederic Jameson, who theorised the coexistence of the various modes of production, emergent formations of politics, and culture as the logic of global postmodernism, a force that standardises heterogeneity in an accelerated way.¹¹

Ai was also profoundly influenced by contemporary American artists such as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, a lineage he documented by taking a photograph of himself in front of Warhol's 1966 *Self-Portrait* at the MoMA in 1988. Although Ai speaks of otherness, difference, and the concrete existence of objects, practices, and people, he does so in a way that remains conceptually faithful to his predecessors' canon while drawing on the specifically Chinese experience of homogenisation to critique the violent globalised repackaging of difference, which treats inequality as sameness. This is nowhere more evident than in his 2010 *Sunflower Seeds*, a work that speaks of globalisation but is, in fact, a mondialising work. Consisting of millions of tiny individual works of art, each apparently identical, but, on closer inspection, unique—each of the seeds has been individually sculpted,

¹⁰ Lu, S.H. (2001). *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 6-7.

¹¹ Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.



[Fig. 1]. Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds (Kui Huan Zi)* 2010, Tate Modern, London. Photo by Waldopepper. Courtesy of Waldopepper.

handcrafted and brushed by specialists working in small-scale workshops in Jingdezhen—*Sunflower Seeds* is far from industrially produced.

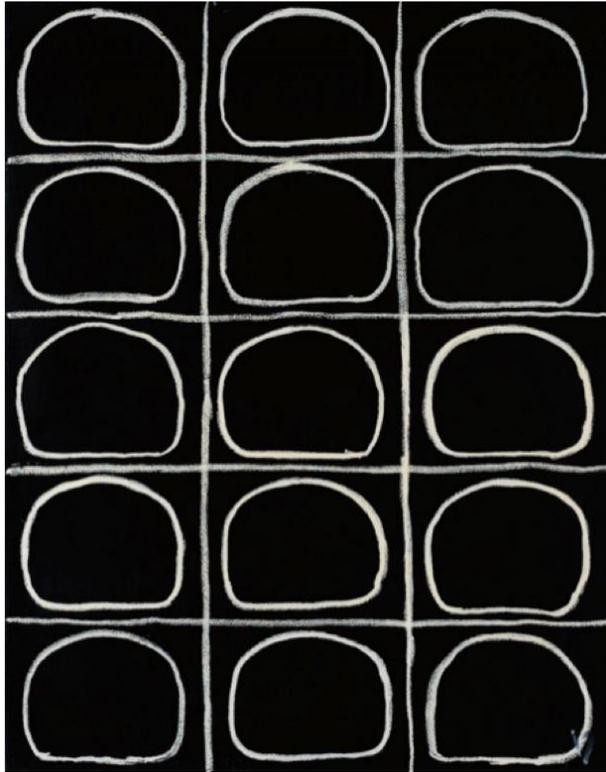
Poured into the interior of Tate Modern Turbine Hall's vast industrial space, the 100 million seeds made of China's most prized export—porcelain—resemble an infinite landscape while foregrounding praxis and labour in an unambiguous invitation to reconsider the meaning of 'Made in China'. The work is a potent critique of the empty global position and its violent processes of abstraction. But *Sunflower Seeds* is more than that. Ai here uses a well-known conceptual gesture of tensional exposure, which simultaneously veils, exposes, and embodies the universe it both signifies and is imbricated in (such as Santiago Sierra's 1996-98 *Workers who Cannot be Paid, Remunerated to Remain inside Cardboard Boxes*, where Sierra paid six refugees from Chechnya to remain inside cardboard boxes for four hours a day in an art gallery).

However, *Sunflower Seeds* also performs a palpable transubstantiation of effort, time, energy, and labour into object, space, and landscape, showing praxis as constancy and endurance. Granted, the work shows the ‘im-mond-ness’ of globalisation and its misery-inflicting labour-outsourcing structures but the beautifully crafted and delicate, inviting-to-touch, delicious-to-hold objects re-embodiment the skill and the care invested in their production. They embody life energy.

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun’s approach is very different yet creates similar mondialising axiologies. A First-Nations artist, Yuxweluptun draws on a variety of canons combining Northwest Coast ovoids with Surrealism, among other forms of Western Modernism, which he reciprocally appropriates, by appropriating Surrealism’s appropriation of Indigenous artifacts, such as Northwest Coast masks. This “reciprocal appropriation”¹² engages contemporaneity yet goes both against the grain of traditional Northwest Coast Indigenous art and against the global contemporary canon where such appropriations are seen as passé because they refer to the supposedly exhausted priority of influences, which, in today’s fragmented global temporality, are seen as belonging to the sequential, no longer relevant modernist mode of thought and perception. Yuxweluptun often represents the mythological native as a colonially construed creature and explicitly addresses colonial atrocities, by way of flat political gestures, in the manner of the Western 1960-70s feminist artists, such as Gina Paine or Martha Rosler. A case in point is Yuxweluptun’s 2013 *Residential School Dirty Laundry*. In this work, a large crucifix is covered in children’s underwear sporadically stained

¹² Townsend-Gault, C. (1995). The Salvation Art of Yuxweluptun. *Born to Live and Die on Your Colonialist Reservations*. Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, 5.

with bloodlike red paint, unambiguously referencing the abuse that small children, snatched from their parents and homes, had to endure in colonial schools, a practice belatedly recognised as cultural genocide by the 2008 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which gathered 7000 statements from residential school survivors, and established, beyond any doubt, the depth and the reach of century-long psycho-somatic, individual, and social violence. In a similarly ‘flat’ political gesture, in a 1997-1999 work entitled *An Indian Shooting the Indian Act*, Yuxweluptun physically took the infamous Indian Act—which dates from 1876 and decrees how Canadian government defines the 614 First Nations, their members, and their system of reserves—to London. Tracing the act to British legislation, which became part of the Canadian Constitution via the Royal Proclamation and the British North America Act, Yuxweluptun legally shot the Indian Act at the Healey Estate and Bisley Camp, a site where World War II soldiers were trained in rifle shooting. By appropriating a performative mode which operates like a failed speech act—an act mimicking an authoritative, reality-inaugurating gesture that fails to bring about the desired transformation (such as the royal baptism of a ship) due to the non-authoritative position of the person performing the act—, Yuxweluptun establishes the lineage of responsibility that frequent changes of power state structures tend to obfuscate. Paradoxically, this lineage delineates the magnitude of the colonial crime, precisely because it foregrounds its irreparability. But, similarly to Ai’s, Yuxweluptun’s oeuvre includes another, in this context more relevant, mondialising practice: the production of conceptual-traditional ovoid shapes, such as his 2014 *Just Practice* which creates an existential space that is clearly related to Northwestern religious beliefs, the spirit world, and the animals, the thunderbirds, the bears, and the salmon, yet is shown in a way that places the act and the process of world-making



[Fig. 2]. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun *Just Practice*, 2014. Photo by Ken Mayer. Courtesy of the photographer.

within a conceptual canon reminiscent of Gerhard Richter, Joseph Beuys or Mangelos's.

Works like *Just Practice*—an iterative praxis, that, in principle, is practicable by all—are an existential supplement to Yuxweluptun's humorous works like his 1990 *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix a Hole in the Sky* where we see a white man engaged in a bizarre action of trying to fix a self-caused problem in an obviously absurd way: by constructing a linear structure, in which one strange object is precariously balanced on another in an effort to fix a hole in the sky with inappropriate tools—a large tape—and in an inept way.

Both Ai's and Yuxweluptun's work acknowledges the epistemological violence of the different forms of cultural and political colonialism and their obligatory reductionist standardisation. Both artists negotiate the difference through the mediation and re-interpretation of signs. Both insist on alterity while, at the same time, framing and reframing reality, rendering the invisible visible and, perhaps most importantly, rendering the invisible political in a conceptual (but not abstract), simultaneously concrete, and practicable way. The word 'political' comes from living together in a built structure and cannot be separated from the design, interaction and interpenetration of the (various) processes of world-making and world-forming in spatial, temporal, relational and sensorial ways.

In Native, North American science, the 'world' is ecologically interrelated to multiple universes. The practice of living is a practice of 'seeking life', of seeking a concrete entrance into the axiology of infinite worlds and times, which could refer to any number of practices: art, architecture, cosmology, cooking, or medicine.¹³ The purpose of locating such an entrance or portal is to existentially apprehend the world in its teeming heterogeneity and multiple temporalities. The world is here a memory of all its various iterations sedimented into its becoming; it is an energy-matter continuum in perpetual flux, which, in concrete terms, refers to innumerable interactions of human, animal, and mineral agents, and the creation of entwined ecological axiologies. The emphasis, in seeking life as a practice of world-making similar to Nancy's mondialisation, is on emergent directionality and protean perceptual-mnemonics.¹⁴ Once entered, created, and articulated, such a world is never single or homo-

¹³ Cajete, G. (2000). *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers.

¹⁴ Cajete, *Native Science*.

genous, nor is it an assortment of heterogeneous elements. It is profoundly heterogeneous yet unique. Unlike global or Indigenous art, which homogenise heterogeneity through common-denominator diversification, or, conversely, insist on homogeneity to preserve alterity, mondialising art practice seeks life. It creates worlds through an iterative engagement with patterns of differencing on a scale that is simultaneously minuscule and immense, concrete and situated, yet of incontestable global relevance.

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