



MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

# GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

SYMPOSIUM Global Imaginations: How to Visualize an Interconnected World?

Research Centre for Material Culture (Leiden, The Netherlands)

25 September 2015

## Introduction

Kitty Zijlmans

It all started with imagination, the imagination to have a big contemporary art exhibition in Leiden showing artists from all continents. This imagining was shared by the group of curators we formed to realize the 'Global Imaginations' exhibition: Meta Knol, director of Museum De Lakenhal, Nicole Roepers, curator of contemporary art at De Lakenhal, Anke Bangma, curator of contemporary art at the National Museum of World Cultures, and Manon Braat, project leader, supported by our intern Hidde van Greuningen, now a graduate of the MA in Arts & Culture, and as fellow thinker and co-organizer of the symposium, Wayne Modest, Head of the Research Centre for Material Culture. In the preparatory stage of the project we had numerous organizational and curatorial meetings – obviously – as well as a number of expert meetings, at which we invited scholars and critics to share their ideas with us and to give us critical feedback. The imagination took shape and grew into the current exhibition. We offered the frame, but the artists provided their visualized and materialized imaginations, and truly created a world to discover.

But the genesis of this idea goes back a few years earlier. Meta Knol, at that time curator at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, had organized the exhibition entitled 'Beyond the Dutch. Indonesia, the Netherlands and the Visual Arts, from 1900 until now' at the museum. I later came to co-edit the accompanying book. It was the first show to date on art from Indonesia on this scale and it centred around three liminal points in time: 1900 (colonial period), 1950 (fight for freedom and independence from the side of Indonesia), and 2000 (postcolonial era). On her preparatory trip

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to Indonesia, Meta asked if and how contemporary artists in Indonesia today still relate to the Dutch or the period of Dutch colonization. The response she got was: “Come on, Meta, we are beyond the Dutch!” That is a telling statement: Holland is no longer the centre towards which everything is geared or from which everything departs; Indonesia is its own centre, defining its own periphery, and Holland may not even be a part of that periphery.

It is not easy to set aside one’s Eurocentric point of view, but it is paramount to realize what one’s located-ness (if not biasedness) means – both personally and academically – to understand today’s world. This is something I have been working on and have been propagating in my teaching and research since the mid-1990s. My call to ‘show your colours’ is geared towards a comprehension of the perspective from which you look at the world, from your own background and education, and towards acknowledging and appreciating other standpoints. That is, seeing Europe not as the centre, but as a province of the world, or perhaps, to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words, to “provincialize Europe”. With regard to political history, he recognizes a deep debt to European thought but at the same time claims how universalistic thought has always been and has already been modified by particular histories, whether or not we could excavate such pasts fully. (p. xiii-xiv) Much of this history and its legacies – such as the phenomenon of ‘political modernity’, that is, the rule by modern institutions, the state, bureaucracy, capitalist enterprise, scientific rationality, and notions such as civil society, citizenship, human rights, etc. – may at some point in time have had European thought and history as their frame of reference, but, Chakrabarty continues, this heritage is now global. After all, he adds matter-of-factly, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century European colonizers both preached this Enlightenment humanism to the colonized and at the same time denied it in practice. And this heritage’s sources were multiple and not singular. Instead of one human universalism stemming from Western European Humanism, there are diverse ways of being-in-the-world, and all these ways are interconnected, with multiple historical and present-day ties.

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This connects very well with anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's analysis of global interconnectednesses in her book *Friction* from 2005. Her point of departure is that global connections are everywhere; but she then poses the very simple but equally hard to answer question: "How does one study the global?" In her book, she makes an ethnography of global connections, zooming in on zones of what she calls 'cultural friction', which are more often than not born out of distress. "Global connections give grip to universal aspirations", Tsing says, and it is precisely this attention to the universal – not the Eurocentric humanist truth claim of 'the universal' very much similar to Chakrabarty – but the basic given that we are all human, and that we are stuck with universals created in cultural dialogue. This is one aspect the Global Imaginations project touched upon: How do ideas of the 'universal' stroke with global interconnections?

Chen Zhen's globe, made up of parallels and meridians forming a rationalist system of coordinates and enclosing excerpts in Chinese from 'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights', marks the entrance of the Global Imaginations exhibition. Around the equator Chen Zhen has attached chairs from various cultures and times, facing outwards. The title is telling. We have our 'backs to fullness, facing emptiness', obviously not aware of what lies behind us and what we could perhaps easily access, if we would just face one another – and as importantly – to follow Levinas' call to show respect for the face of the other, because it is the irreducible otherness of the other that may open up a dialogue. The Declaration of Human Rights may be embraced by the globe but apparently not by its inhabitants. Meschac Gaba's flag *Citoyen du monde* (citizens of the world) that we have taken as our banner, also testifies to this equivocality: a citizen is a member of a political community who enjoys the rights and assumes the duties of membership, but this is far from everyday reality and we are also more than our nation-state identity. Moreover, Gaba's flag (another nation-state symbol) which consists of all the nation-state flags of the world stitched together into one whole, is as much a construction as Chen Zhen's globe.

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In our discussions in preparation for the symposium we asked ourselves many times: What work can the imagination do as a future project? What possible futures can be conceived by constructive imagination, by challenging frames of knowledge such as predominant taxonomies, categorizations, cartographies, and notions such as globalization? These are all concepts; there are many ways they have been given shape in the past and they are always open to new possibilities. But concepts do not necessarily precede a concretization; nothing is logically predetermined or naturally given – matter and mind co-evolve in the process of a creative act, and this is where the artist more than anyone else comes in. Arjun Appadurai suggests that the collective imagination leads or contributes to the emergence of a non-anthropocentric, yet social force:

The image, the imagined, the imaginary – these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as social practice*. No longer mere fantasy ..., no longer simple escape ..., no longer elite pastime ... and no longer mere contemplation ..., the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labour and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. (Appadurai 2010 [1996]: 31)

The imagination as a form of work and a form of negotiation implies an activity, a process of becoming between agents and possibilities. It is at the intersection of three ways of accessing the world – academia, museums and their collections, and contemporary art – that new imaginations can take shape. We need them more than ever. The present-day situation marked by ongoing rapid changes in new media technology, the unpredictability and vulnerability of the global finance system and the significant rise in voluntary and involuntary migration, demands that we seek out other more novel approaches to understanding global relations.

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This symposium foregrounds art's and artefact's broader potential to help us comprehend the complex, multifarious and even chaotic entanglements of the world in which we live. It is our contention that contemporary art can help us find alternative, diverse mappings of the world, opening up unexpected, unusual – and even disparate – imaginings of these global entanglements. So one question we put to the symposium is: What role do artists play in making visible the flows and frictions of global interconnections? How do artists intervene in existing world views and how do these interventions help us to understand the complex fabric of today's world? If we, with Chantal Mouffe, acknowledge the political in its antagonistic dimension, envisaging the problems facing our societies in a political way, and art as a force to subvert the dominant hegemony (Mouffe 2007: 2-5), how might we then come to a politics of the imagination? The first conversation between Marjolijn Dijkman and Monica Juneja will revolve around this question.

Interconnectedness per se is seen in the World Wide Web and the never-ending stream of images and texts that flood our PCs, cell phones, iPads and the like. But how connected are we? And how free to roam cyberspace? What role do new media technologies play in how we understand experience and the world we share with others? Shani Orgad, author of the book *Media Representation and the Global Imagination* (2012) will go into conversation with Femke Herregraven who questions structures of power and tries to reveal the mechanisms of global economies by designing – among others – computer games.

The world consists of past and present imaginations, and new imaginings – dreams if you like – are formed all the time. In the third and last conversation, Chris Robbins and John Ewing of Ghana Thinktank will exchange with Esther Peeren of Amsterdam University thoughts about what forms of earlier 'global' imaginings still haunt our global contemporary world, and how to cope with these spectres.

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