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Art, Ego and Effectiveness; Constructive Challenges for Social Sculpture in the Age of Social Networking

Post Script.

The lecture I gave during the last panel of the Global Arts Symposium was not a written text, but rather a reaction to the questions raised during the two days that preceded performance.

Since this presentation is now available on YouTube, it might be best here to outline some of the more critical points raised in the discussion following my presentation.

During the conference the term “Global Art” was raised many times. And yet none of us speaking ever really dared to define what that term meant. I suggested that there is a difference between art that is deliberately manufactured with the intention of reaching a global audience, and art (and artists) that, through success, become globalised.

It struck me that creative forms made with the intention of reaching global audiences are most likely too banal for the elevated dialogues of art-world criticism. The Mail Art projects of the 1960s are the only example I can immediately think of. This style of art is distinct for its anti-elitist, socially inclusive and sometimes folksy approach to sharing art practice internationally through popular and easily accessible media. While Mail Art has evolved to have a presence on the Internet, it is increasingly indistinguishable from ‘spam’, leading me to the conclusion that perhaps spam is one of the few forms of contemporary cultural production that could merit the categorisation ‘Global Art’.

Visual Art is almost always created locally and consumed locally. Even when component parts, such as a circuit board made in China, are put together with a teak frame grown in Madagascar to show a video made in Germany, we consider that work as manufactured locally in the artist’s studio. Exhibiting an artwork internationally does not necessarily make it global; rather, it elicits a series of local reactions to an artwork on an international scale.

The production of sequential local reactions render this art as a global product, but somehow, that doesn’t make sense, because by definition there is rarely one unanimous ‘global’ reaction to a work, i.e. ‘Global audiences loved the artwork X’...

An exhibition that travels from New York to London to Paris is not received in the same way, and outside the banalities of Internet social networking media and measuring the number of hits to a website, we have yet to realize how a global audience might articulate its responses. Art is made to be in dialogue with its audience, and while the Internet continues to be key to our realisation of global platforms, knowing that several hundred people pressed the 'like' or 'dislike' button on facebook is not an adequate response to the question which asks 'what does a global audience look like'?

I continue to insist that 'Global Art' is a contentious term, preferring to return to the idea of an artwork travelling internationally and soliciting a series of locally generated responses. I used the exhibition of my work *Portes-Oranges* (2005-2007) as an example of this. Audiences encountering this work in Manchester, Graz, Johannesburg, Basel and New York reacted with a surprising spectrum of responses, ranging from mostly utterly passive (in spite of the signs I put up inviting audiences to eat the oranges displayed throughout the installation) to violently destructive. This same artwork which served as a kind of baby-crèche with free food on the eve of the vernissage at PS1 MoMA in 2007, was one week later vandalised, and repeatedly so for the following three months. I could not surmise what the 'global audience's' response was to this work, although I am sure it would be a good candidate for being defined as 'global art'. There are rarely 'global' reactions to art, but rather a series of consecutive local reactions.

During the Global Arts Symposium, we repeatedly turned to the idea of the 'global' being somehow problematic. Most likely because of its direct association with the term 'globalisation'. We rejected the term 'international' as it somehow smacked of elitism and struggled to find a descriptive framework that was free of association with the inequalities of late capitalism.

I began my discussion by pointing out that most post-colonial, and in my case, black diasporan identities are the product of global exchanges. While during the conference I was keen to point out the multi-racial diversity inherent in diasporan communities of the Americas and Caribbean, on leaving I realised that the entire population of North and South America is a direct example of global cultural exchange. Do we define South American art or the art of the USA as 'Global Art'?

To move away from potential circular discussion of what is and is not Global Art, I moved to the practical example of Art in Social Structures (AiSS), an NGO I founded in 2007 in collaboration with a series of friends and colleagues across a diverse range of fields, working internationally. AiSS works primarily in Ghana and aims to support educational initiatives in

visual culture, social development projects and the preservation of critical heritage sites. Until 2010, the NGO was a 'donor-member society', meaning that all of the funding came from artist members from the group and not from external grant applications. For the most part, AiSS funders were African artists who work internationally, and therefore our funding system was an example of globalisation at work.

AiSS could not have been realised without the support of a community of artists working internationally. We wanted to prove that artists were capable not only of engaging in social activism, but also that we were capable of bearing the costs financially. This is particularly important, as artists are generally not seen to be socially conscious or productive activists. The first three years of our activities were funded exclusively by our artist members, and due to the massive extent of our social network, we were able to produce a series of large-scale projects with relatively low budgets.

A few years ago I was invited by two African colleagues, Elvira Dyangani Ose and Gabi Ngcobo, to present at a panel discussion at Arco Madrid. Following our presentations, the other panelists and I were offered funding for our next projects by AECID, the cultural department of the Spanish Government. It was a completely unexpected and fortuitous set of events, and through the subsequent grant we began our most critical work to date in Ghana, the Architectural Heritage Project, which is currently ongoing. I don't know if I want to call it a global project, but it somehow has global roots.

The term 'global' is increasingly perceived as something monolithic and totalising, a monstrous exploiting machine that acts upon and subsumes smaller, less defined cultures. This characterisation did not develop without reason, and there are more than enough examples to justify this stance. Nonetheless, there are many instances where the term 'global' has been used to great effect, as in the case of Amnesty International or the undeniable surge of Occupy movements across the globe.

The Global Art conference aptly raised more questions than answers. An undeniable sense of urgency underpinned the two days of this event, forcing all of us present to think about what the word 'global' has meant historically, its negative and positive permutations and in reflection of the former, what we would like it to mean. Together with many audience members, I expressed a desire to utilise the positive aspects of global networks while circumventing the negative effects of the increasingly crumbling capitalist machine. While for the moment we continue to struggle with the questions of the day, a small consolation lies in the knowledge that artists, no matter what the circumstances, are known for their ability to find solutions.