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# “Translating the Silence”

## A conversation with *le peuple qui manque*

**For this book, we have devised a set of interviews or position pieces with curators, since we regard curatorial practice as transversally agentive across three fields central to our thinking for this book: museums, contemporary art, and colonialism. We think that these are fields from which anthropology gets challenged and within which it is particularly mobilised in a generative way. Bearing this in mind, how would you situate your practice as curators and as a curatorial platform? Do you, in your practice, seek precisely to transcend these kinds of distinctions, and if so, how? Please elaborate with view to your emphasis on theory and research.**

The expression you use – “transversally agentive” – is very accurate.<sup>1</sup> When considering the relationship between art and anthropology (or between art and something else), it is often assumed that art denotes a defined set of practices and discourses, that art is a discipline like any other, from which to build bridges (interdisciplinarity). There is obviously nothing more false and even absurd, since the ontological extension of art to the ensemble of fields of the possible has indeed taken place. As curators engaged in what you could call a ‘research-based’ turn, we consider the field of art as an “ecology of knowledge”, borrowing from the “sociologist of emergence” Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Imhoff and Quiros 2014) – an ecology of knowledge from which to consider, together, artistic, indigenous, scientific, fictional knowledge, and more broadly, knowledge disqualified by the partitions of modernity. We consider this possibility for the (still largely vacuous) field of art as going against a certain hegemonic discourse on art, which has been predominant for two decades. It is one which thinks of art and its relationship to research as the realization of this “epistemological anarchism” theorised by the philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend, according to whom “everything is good” – any methodology “against the method”, that is, against the uses accepted by the discipline (anthropology for example) would, in any circumstance, produce knowledge. To the contrary, we postulate that this ‘anarchism’, which nevertheless remains very interesting, does not take sufficient account of the

historical possibilities and skills offered by the field of art and curatorial practice. More specifically, curating is an interstitial practice and a practice of translation between epistemological regimes – between different contexts, between discourses and practices, or, to use your expression, it is a “transversally agentive” practice. We thus suggest our *curatorial politics*, our ecology of knowledge, as first and foremost a *politics of translation*. Translation, however, in a sense that does not adhere to a principle of fidelity, but is always a poetics, a “listening to the continuous”, as Henri Meschonnic put it, wherein the *subject* is fully part of the very process of translation between texts (or rather here, contexts and practices). There is this beautiful sentence by the Russian poet Boris Pasternak about the act on language produced by the translation of poetry, which we could transpose to curatorial practice: “Moving from one



Fig. 7.2 First Declaration of the Stateless Museum, film directed by Aliocha Imhoff & Kantuta Quirós, La Réunion: La plaine des Sables, 2017



Fig. 7.3 First Declaration of the Stateless Museum, film directed by Aliocha Imhoff & Kantuta Quirós, La Réunion: La plaine des Sables, 2017

language to another is more than just going from one region to another. It is rather a step from one century that did not exist into a century that is dreamt up" (Pasternak 1959).

The fields you suggest – museums, coloniality, and contemporary art – with the relations and divisions between them, are very pertinent for us. They evoke one of our projects that took the form of a film, entitled *The Stateless Museum*. This project inscribes itself in a certain genealogy of fictional museums and their bringing about of crises within art institutions. The notion of statelessness allows us to escape to the antiphony of a contemporary nomadology, which considers the art world as space of a fluidity that is travelling, happy, and triumphant, or exalting of a translating thought in which language renders itself at once global and entirely vehicular. This thought of translation conceives language only as a medium, a vector of communication – like ‘globish’, global English. In contrast to this perspective, which advocates an easy grip on language, we postulate, with Glissant, the irreducible “right to opacity” of languages. A language, among other things, is nothing more than an integral of equivocals that its history has allowed to persist, as Lacan said. On the contrary, the notion of stateless person, if it describes *par excellence* a figure of displacement, of exile, refers above all to the reality of blocked bodies, prevented because the stateless is the place of a radical heteroglossia: this irreducible remainder, this thick shadow which resides in translation. Translation therein remains an infinite process, burdened by the gravity of bodies, texts, and works to be circulated in the so-called globalised space, as well as by the conflictuality, especially post-colonial, which regulates the movement of artists, signs, and objects.

**When did you first come into contact with anthropology, and what is anthropology to you today? How do you relate to anthropology's legacies in the present?**

If we speak as actors from the art world, indeed, anthropology has been, for us, a very structuring base for thinking about the space of art. This has not so much been the case because of anthropology's relation to ‘radical otherness’, to supposed *Others*, but, for us, as a constant reconfiguration of the relationships between actors, producers, and viewers – in other words, as a political dislodgement (*déplacement*) from the modalities of enunciations and the formal *dispositifs* displacement that produce them.

Jean Rouch's filmography, for example, has been for us very significant. Deleuze later declared about Rouch's film *Moi, un Noir* (1958) that “the people are missing” – an idea that inspired the name of our curatorial platform (Deleuze 1985). It also was important for us regarding his theorizing of the

figure of the intercessor for documentary cinema; and *Chronique d'un été* (1961, with Edgar Morin) as a prefiguration of a polyphonic writing of art (and here, of cinema). All of Rouch's filmography, like all the history of anthropology, testifies to a particular attention paid to a reconfiguration of the *dispositifs* of enunciation.

Despite these close ties (*filiation*) of attention with the formal *dispositifs* of enunciation, which remains very operative for us today, a particular misunderstanding about anthropology often remains. It is a misunderstanding between those who wrongly think that 'radical alterity' (which would be the subject of anthropology) has become the basis for a rethinking of criticism (to be reworked with regard to an Elsewhere, after the end of the ideologies and promises of modernity), and those who think, almost in the opposite way, but also wrongly, that the anthropological grid has been used in the art world exclusively (we underline) against or in spite of a certain politicization of art. The exhibition that is seminal in this respect, *Les Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), has often been criticised for having privileged the anthropological paradigm as a heuristic grid for approaching non-Western works of art, despite more directly political (left-wing, even revolutionary) approaches, in the context of the Tricontinental and the Non-Aligned movement discourses of the time.

However, neither of these two perspectives proved to be entirely accurate considering the importance of our first filiation, that is, the emergence of a *politics of enunciation* (often summarised far too quickly by *who speaks and from where?*) maintained and theorised by the history of anthropology. James Clifford specified its nomenclature of formal *dispositifs* of knowledge enunciation brilliantly in *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), analysing the different regimes of authority that have marked the history of anthropology – from monological authority to dialogical authority and then the polyphonic authority called for by post-modern anthropology, including participant observation.

The whole history of anthropology – and this it shares with art – manages, like no other discipline stemming from modernity, to escape its original framework, to extend to infinity (to become "post", almost from its origin and well before its postmodern shift), and to reconfigure the order of knowledge: From Lévi-Strauss' "writer's desire" to Eduardo Kohn's anthropology of the forest (and his anthropology beyond *anthropos*), via Bruno Latour or Viveiros de Castro, it became increasingly difficult to 'reduce' anthropology to a uniform discipline with fixed contours, and even less so as a 'filter' that could be applied to any *topic*. In other words, it is a poetic, formal, and political history of the configurations of enunciations, but also of exchanges, correspondences, and translations from which we must depart again (*repartir*)

when it comes to the relation between art and anthropology. Either for art or anthropology, therefore, it is not a question of rebuilding criticism or escaping politics, but rather, together, of pursuing the formal exploration of the modalities and locations of speaking as much as of redesigning the ordering of knowledge and practices. This implies as much the spaces for the exercise of democracy as the spaces for the production of knowledge and the poetics that run through them.

**Where do you grapple with anthropology today? Where do you think that critical and in your view, interesting or new, knowledge production concerning anthropology takes place today?**

Regarding the above, our interest in the contemporary forms of enunciation – what we call *scenographies of speech* (scénographies de la parole), articulated in our work through discursive proposals in the form of mock trials, imaginary diplomatic congresses, or parliaments of things – meets an expanded understanding of the subjects in a contemporary anthropology.

If, for a long time, the question addressed to anthropology, both by its postmodern turn and by art, was the question of the authoritative position of the producer of knowledge (*scripteur du savoir*) pursuing the decentralisation dear to post-structuralist thinkers and ‘standpoint’ epistemologies (post-feminists, queer, post-colonial, ...) – today, it is the silent voice of the world that catches up with us. With the Anthropocene, all life becomes worthy of inhabiting a wider parliament, which opens itself up to animals, plants, machines, cyborgs, objects.

Indeed, the ecological, even cosmomorphic, turn in anthropology goes hand in hand with a great current gesture of broadening its subjects and objects, but also about broadening the recognition of subjectivities and enunciating subjects. We are thinking here, for instance, of Eduardo Kohn (*How Forests Think*, 2013)<sup>2</sup> and an anthropology that pays attention to the murmur of the living, the language of Earth (David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous*), the language of animals (the works of Vinciane Despretz, for example), and new entries into both the anthropological scene and the arena of political representation.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, as identified by Pierre Montebello,<sup>4</sup> this *cosmomorphic turn* in anthropology, philosophy, and metaphysics joins the project of an extended attention to everything (Garcia 2011), without particular privilege granted to any of them, carried by new ontologies – “flat ontologies” – in a democratic gesture in the face of the sensitive where all objects would become worthy of equal interest (human and non-human, living and non-living, animated and inanimate, existing, having existed, to come, or imaginary, objects or

works of art). In this respect, it also meets with the ecological concern for renewed political representation,<sup>5</sup> through the establishment of new parliamentary forms, and the necessity to make lakes, rivers, mountains, forests, oceans, and more generally, the land, legal subjects, able to claim rights and to bring to justice against those who are responsible for the great contemporary ecocide.<sup>6</sup>

Today, many of the most challenging projects in the field of art are at the intersection of anthropology, fictional diplomacy, and law – as, for example, Terike Haapoja and Laura Gustafsson with their *Museum of Non-Humanity* and *The Trial* – a fictional trial around non-human law, led from the case of the wolf Perho; or Bruno Latour and Frédérique Aït-Touati's pre-enactment of COP21; or Christophe Bergon and Camille de Toledo's *PRLMT*, the parliament stripped of its vowels. These projects work to rethink constitutions, forms of representation, rebalancing the rights of human and non-human subjects. These thought experiments developed on a 1:1 scale in the field of art, and which are part of what we call a "potential regime" (Imhoff, Quirós, and Toledo 2016), are concomitant with the work of legal retooling carried out in the real political space by indigenous, ecological, and political movements, and for which democracies provided space, particularly in Latin America.<sup>7</sup>

Such an extended anthropology, cosmomorphic and poetic, is then woven into a fragile place of the desire to restore the word, to translate unheard voices,<sup>8</sup> to make themselves diplomats (Morizot 2016), and to listen to silence – silence of land that has become inaudible, silence of birds after their tragic disappearance, but also the silence of disappeared languages (as in Susan Hiller) and the rarefactions of world views they represent. This anthropological expansion is therefore to be thought of as one of listening, as the theorist Marielle Macé clearly reminds us.<sup>9</sup>

**As part of your reflections on *Magiciens de la Terre*, you claimed: "Global art has failed. Which other geo-esthetic regimes are to be invented and practised in the years to come? Which instituting gestures are necessary to provoke a shift? And finally, which museums and institutions to re-imagine?" (2015) How would you respond to these questions today and in view of the developments since then?**

The main focus of the *Beyond the Magiciens-effect* ('Au-delà de l'Effet-Magiciens') meetings, which we organised in early 2015, was the question of how to overcome a certain globalism, or global turn, of the 2000s that to us seemed still widely accepted until this point.

While the nationalist reassertion of many countries around the world (Brazil, United States, United Kingdom, Turkey, etc.) invites numerous



theorists today to identify, more locally, a set of contextual strategies, others are now more concerned with pursuing efforts towards an ecologisation of the art space, as the primary space for reflection and proposals towards a habitable and inhabited world. Bruno Latour, for instance, suggests speaking of "earthlings" rather than humans (not characterised by a necessary return to the earth, but caused by the return of the earth in the order of the present). The principal question is thus whether we can identify an "earthly *geo-aesthetics*" today.

**This last question is about what we might call disciplinary claims or disciplinary sovereignty. Up until recently, art history focused predominantly on a history of European art, while non-European art was mostly regarded and professionally constituted as the domain of anthropological research. Can you describe how you regard these disciplinary divisions, and whether and to what extent you see or even participate in breaking down these divisions?**

Besides its reactionary margins, art history has for the most part opened its canon and its working methodologies (*world art history*, connected history, etc.). It has taken note, to a large extent, that modernity is to be conjugated in the plural. It is nonetheless regrettable that this revision took place out of sync with theories of art and the field of historiography itself. Rather, it has been done much more closely aligned with the development of new globalised markets. This asymmetry reflects another more profound problem, which could be considered to be the blind spot of art history. We are here referring to the lack of reflexivity on the very notion of art – that is, on the movements brought about by each of the agents of art (artists, institutions, theorists, critics, etc.) on what is or is not regarded as art. The subject of art history still remains art and is too little interested in the conflict, in the *war*, preceding the becoming of art. The anthropology of art, by contrast, has understood this quite some time ago; and, for example, the work of Alfred Gell – for whom any object (art, artefact, idol, ritual, functional, etc.) is a work of art – is always considered within a network of relationships between agents and patients, that is, as a set of elements between the *indice* (the object itself), the *artist* (or other producers), the *recipient* (the viewer), and the *prototype* (what is 'represented' by the work in a broader sense). It is the set of relations that constitute the 'art network', recognised as such by the various social actors, thus further expanding the ideas of art propounded by the work of Nelson Goodman and Howard Becker.

To understand the issue of restitution today<sup>10</sup> – and for which art historians (or museum directors) are regularly opposed to anthropologists (the

former considering these objects *exclusively* as art and the latter as *something else* first of all) – it is also necessary to revisit the agency and social history of objects, at the expense of what, objects, run the risk of becoming renegotiated currency between Nations (we would of course take the side of the dominated Nations – this would be the minimum) – and thus reducing the intellectual and aesthetic scope, and the possible plurality of art narratives. The space of conflict – of interpretation, designation, displacement – must be ordered by a poetics. This is what John Pepper (2004) envisioned when he invited us to consider looted, displaced African art objects as being a diaspora themselves. He proposed to conceptualise a history of African art objects by thinking of them as vehicles, as time and space, for “diasporas of images”, moving objects articulating disparate cultural histories. We also recall Jennifer Gonzalez’s brilliant analyses, in *Subject to Display* (2008), of the material logic of objects in museum contexts and the way in which they are “epidermalised” therein as subjects of racist projections (Gonzalez 2008). Despite the stated desire for greater egalitarianism, some objects continue to occupy only limited spaces in museums: display strategies which nevertheless place a semantic hierarchy on the exhibited objects.

The question remains: how to reinvent forms of experimental museography without reifying tangible and intangible heritage? The will to reflect on the decolonisation of museums and the voice and life proper of the objects and communities from which they come, remains quite exemplary in this respect today. Do these diasporic objects have a voice? Can they cry and demand a “right to return”?

## Notes

1. The image on p. 210 is Figure 7.1 ‘Beyond the Magiciens Effect’, symposium performance curated by Aliocha Imhoff & Kantuta Quirós, scenography by Adel Cersaque, © Helena Hattmansdorfer, le peuple qui manque; 2015.
2. An “anthropology of life”, an anthropology, he writes, that is not limited to the human being but is concerned with our “entanglements (...) with other types of lives” (see Kohn 2007).
3. “A metallic voice, tapering like a blade, trembling (...) with a cold rage ready to submerge them. Then there were words.” Pierre Ducrozet tells the story of the *émergence* of the ecological children of the twenty-first century, of the voice, at COP 24 in Katowice, of the young Greta Thunberg, who is on strike from school. She stood in front of the Swedish Parliament with a “Strike for the Climate” placard, soon joined by tens of thousands of schoolchildren, high school

students, and university students – children of the twenty-first century – who took to the streets of their city. In Davos, in 2019, where all the world's CEOs gathered, Greta Thunberg came back on stage. Her power seized the assembly again. " 'I don't want your hope. I want you to panic,' whispered the voice", as Pierre Ducrozet writes in 'Nous, enfants du 21eme siècle' (*Libération*).

4. Montebello sees "cosmomorphic views" replacing old anthropomorphic patterns. A new geo-cosmic period eccentrates the human from his world. The human enjoins to redistribute to the non-humans a dignity of being without which the human will end up erasing himself or herself.
5. See how Bruno Latour was able to imagine in 2015, at the *Théâtre des Amandiers*, a pre-enactment of COP 21 (World Climate Conference), eight months before the real COP 21 in Paris took place. This way, he tried to find ways of 'alternative' representation to the given form of an addition of nations, and which is unsuitable, as representative entities, when it comes to considering the fate of the oceans or migrants. During *Make It Work*, it was no longer the states alone but cities, oceans, and land that were invited as political subjects to the negotiating table, thus extending Latour's past reflections on the establishment of a parliament of things.
6. Experiencing the 'idea of democracy' now seems to require a scene, even a scenography, for speech. The conditions for the exercise of the right to speak have been based in contemporary political movements, from the recent "Movements des places" (Syntagma, Nuit Debout, Occupy, ...) to the dream of assemblist democracy of the Gilets Jaunes movement in France, which has highlighted the indistinction and equality in speaking out as a key claim.
7. On 15 March 2017, the Parliament of New Zealand granted the Whanganui River a "legal personality", giving it the right to defend itself in court. The Bolivian Constitution now recognises Pachamama (Mother Earth) as a legal subject. The Andean notion of Living Well has been incorporated into the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions.
8. See the inter-species translator of the artist Tomás Saraceno; poets and bird translators such as Jacques Demarcq; the Quechua singer Luzmila Carpio, translator of birds; or the zoopoetics or bioacoustics of Bernie Krause.
9. Marielle Macé, for example, makes the poem's expertise – in the ability of poets to listen, not only to translate the speculated words of animals and plants, but also to listen to their unspoken voices – a possible future for anthropology (Macé 2019). Her 2019 lectures at the Maison de la Poésie are entitled *Poésie et anthropologie élargie*.
10. In this regard, we welcome the remarkable restitution report by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (submitted to the president of the French Republic in November 2018 and referenced below), which represents a turning point in the

history of restitutions, advocating the return of many African objects in French national collections which were stolen during the colonial period. Let us hope that, beyond the open acknowledgements of the French administration, this report will not remain a dead letter.

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