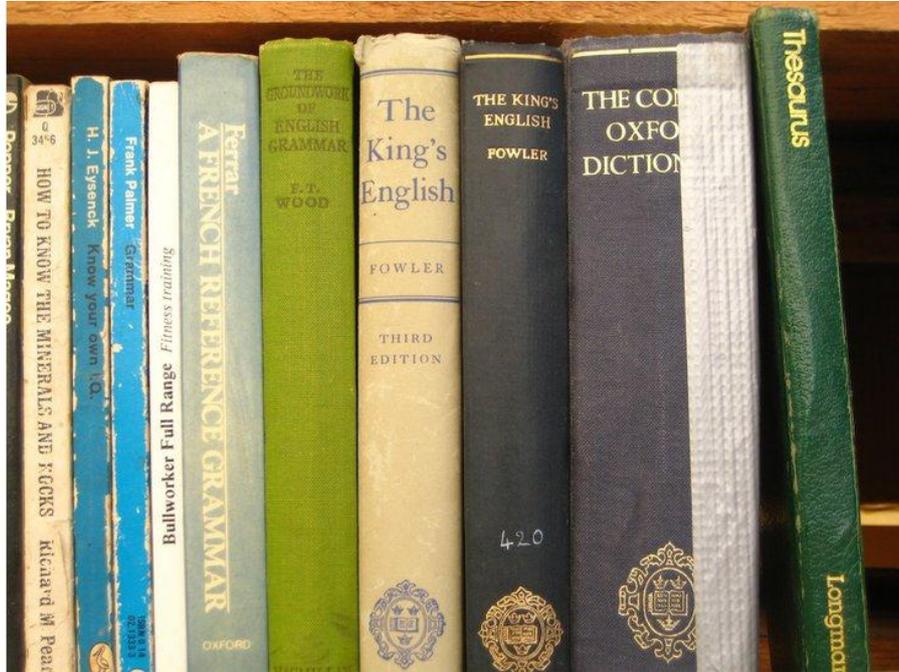


## NETWORKED:

Dialogue & Exchange in the Global Art Ecology  
Triangle Network Conference  
26 & 27 November 2011



## Overlooked Participants: art writers, critics and researchers - by Gemma Sharpe

Preamble: Between 2007 and 2009 I worked for the Triangle Network from the Gasworks office in London as an administrator, before leaving to pursue my Masters at Goldsmiths in Art Writing. Having worked for Triangle and noticed that art writing and criticism was increasingly important to Triangle's partners, I decided to write a 'practice-based' thesis that examined the developing spaces for art writing within the international contemporary art world. The thesis particularly focussed on the problematics of written analysis produced within and distributed across the 'international contemporary art world', along with the issues that writers face when they outstep the comfort of their own knowledge-spheres. This was an over-ambitious topic, which became even more daunting given the scope and complexity of the places I was able to visit as part of the research, and the avenues that these researches opened up.

My research gathered particular momentum in Pakistan after I visited Karachi (via Vasl Artists' Collective, part of the Triangle Network), for a week in the summer of 2009 on my way to India. After this initial dip into Pakistan, the path of my research was further developed by my undertaking an international Vasl residency in the spring of 2010, under the kind, (and as it turned out, incredibly foresighted) invitation of Vasl coordinator Adeela Suleman. The rolling snowball of my engagement with Pakistan kept on growing and

subsequent to this second visit, I returned early in 2011 to take up an extended residency at Vasl, which has now become indefinite residence in Pakistan. I presently work for Vasl and teach full time in Karachi. This unexpected twist in my life and career would not have been possible without Vasl, the Triangle Network, my colleagues at Gasworks, (particularly Alessio Antonioli), and the coordinators across the Triangle Network who variously accommodated and helped me.

My contribution to the 'Network' blog comprises of extracted sections from my MFA thesis (2010), selected for their pertinence to discussions that may be generated during the conference. By nature of the original readership for this writing, the content is rather loaded with the characteristics and references of academic voice. The following text is also rather disjointed, having being extracted from a much longer document. The final paragraphs of this accumulation relate directly to Triangle...

#### PREFACE:

This series of documents is anchored by a tripartite definition of the term apprehension. Firstly, apprehension is understood as a noun that describes a state of awareness or of understanding. Secondly, and also as a noun, apprehension as it describes a state of pre-emptive fear: of being apprehensive. This body of work also folds a third definition of apprehension into its enquiry. Ameliorating the legal or penal definition of apprehension, in this third case the verb 'to apprehend' is taken to describe an intercepting action, by which one accesses or requests control of a body or a situation by interruption or manual involvement. The tripartite question of this composition is then, 'how does the art writer apprehend a global contemporary art world?'

(...)

#### OVERLOOKED PARTICIPANTS, ('RADICANT' WRITERS, RESEARCHERS AND CRITICS):

An editorial written for the 'Precarity' issue of Art and Research magazine opens with reference to the 2009 film *Up in the Air*. Ryan Bingham, played by George Clooney, flies from one place to another on behalf of his company. His job is to administer redundancies. The editorial essay draws a parallel between Bingham's jet-set lifestyle and the 'nomadic' condition of the contemporary art world, 'if one takes into consideration the global expansion of the art biennale and the networks of curators, collectors and artists who circulate within these economies.'<sup>[i]</sup> Curator Nicolas Bourriaud admits in the opening of his book *The Radicant*, that his lifestyle can be called 'nomadic'. He is, he argues, like a radicant plant – of a botanical group that 'do not depend on a single root for their growth but advance in all directions on whatever surfaces present themselves by attaching multiple hooks to them, as ivy does.'<sup>[ii]</sup> This lifestyle of the loosely attached, he suggests, inspires in his case, a theoretical reflection on contemporary art that 'responds less to existing texts than to lived experience.' He continues, 'too often I have had occasion to deplore the link between critics and works – not to underscore the fact that this theoretical reflection is born of my nomadic life – in the course of which I have crossed paths with most of the artists whose work will be discussed here.'<sup>[iii]</sup> It is through this worldview and through these observations that Bourriaud hopes to sketch a 'worldly and worldwide art criticism' through the 'optical tool' of art practice. Although writing a book peppered with references to 'existing texts', in these

terms Bourriaud rejects writing and criticism as being insufficiently attached to the world, both of itself and as an informant of his observations.

I would ask where one might place an art writer or critic within this scenario set out via Bourriaud and Bingham? The globally expanded art world touched on by the Art and Research editors curiously omits art writers and critics from its networks, and Bourriaud, an accustomed actor within these networks takes on the role of a writer of them, sketches an 'art criticism' enabled by his nomadic professional habits as a curator. As he sees it, currently the link between critics and works on a global scale can be 'deplored'. Yet holding these comments together one might wonder whether it is the critic's general omission from these networks that leads to an accusation of lack, or indeed, lag?

(...)

More than any other body, material or object within the global contemporary art world, text has the greatest ability to travel, particularly with the Internet and in printed form, via art magazines. Yet rarely is criticism and publishing discussed in light of a topology of global contemporary art networks. The agency of text-producers and the transformative potential that writing within this scenario might have similarly lacks public theoretical reflection.<sup>[iv]</sup> Yet as indicated by a project like Report (Not Announcement), it is mostly artists and curators who entertain these discourses on nomadism and globalism as it inflicts on contemporary art, rather than those particularly or even largely dedicated to art writing as a practice or profession. Though art writing might travel, most of its producers remain relatively rooted. The 'precariously' professionalised writer or critic requires an anchor within an institution, academia, or a particular specialism in order to join these streams. While there are conduits such as residencies and exhibition programmes available for early or 'mid-career' artists and even curators to negotiate via self-implication a global art world, there are relatively few for writers at this level, least not those working outside recognised centres of contemporary art exchange and production. As such, the jobbing writer, snapping at the heels of contemporary art practice, tends to snap at home or at best, close to home. Bourriaud christens himself a 'radicant' and through his being such, he claims to write an art criticism for the global art world. At the same time however, art critics and writers have very few opportunities to appropriate 'radicancy' and follow the flows of this environment, nor even start contesting these flows through pragmatic experience and directly implicated (or even directly co-opted) practice.

(...)

#### ENCOUNTERING ART'S ECONOMIES:

Questions of economic power and commercial co-option bubble through any project like this one. Yet as Diedrich Diedrichsen articulates, legitimating and justifying discourses around even 'non-commercial' art practices, serve as grist for an industrial mill beneath which the art economy churns, depending upon academic and critical discourse for the production of fiscal value.<sup>[v]</sup> This is an ensemble of economy that one cannot be extricated from. To reject systems of direct capital exchange by avoiding the market is to risk falling blind to a total co-option that, as subjects of capitalism, we are already prey to. Within contemporary art at least, to begin a project of unraveling capitalist forces and the creation of hegemonies therein, one cannot simply reject more obviously capitalist mechanisms – art fairs, commercial galleries, etc. – in favour of others that appear less directly driven by commodities – the

academy, charitable funding, arts councils, etc.[vi] As Hardt and Negri suggest, within capitalism, one is inside a total system rather than a discernable one and as such, ‘the action of the multitude becomes political primarily when it begins to confront directly and with adequate consciousness the central repressive operations of Empire... it is a matter of gathering together the experiences of resistance and wielding them in concert against the centres of imperial demand.’[vii] One cannot apprehend the taciturn arrangements of capitalism by co-opting oneself into any masquerade of a direct alternative. In terms of this accumulation, if any writer is to begin directly coalescing with global patterns of art practice via a series of transitory work-initiated movements within the world, then ‘commercial systems’ will increasingly materialise against or according to that writer’s practice. Yet here I would suggest that anyone involved with what Agamben terms the ‘apparatus’ of public life, society and industry, is always already conversant with those systems.[viii] When one leaves home or enters a zone of strangeness or unfamiliarity however, the pitch and language of the conversation changes or becomes alternatively apparent. When, through any traversal one temporarily loses synch with a previously-normalised state or cultural apparatus, then the subsequent process of subjectification that Agamben sets against this apparatus, can come into play.

(...)

Latin American group Colectivo Situaciones define a method of ‘militant research’. Militant research is a concept-tool that ties the process of research and interpretation to pragmatic action. Knowledge production they argue, affects and modifies the respective context of its participants. The researcher-militant must at all times remain faithful to their state of endless ‘not knowing’ in order to be ‘a character made out of questions, not saturated by ideological meanings and models of the world.’[ix] The researcher-militant works without object and outside definable zones of social practice. Operating always in immanence, the researcher-militant does not aim towards the acquisition of knowledge-results, but rather against the constitution of systems and foundations of knowledge itself. Research is led by a grammar of questions and against any idealisation. Idealisation strengthens mechanisms of objectualisation that Colectivo Situaciones pitch against militant-research and its transformative potential. Articulating a method of research, the group describe a means of generating a research-based practice that elides systems of restraint as it is necessarily within them. This method implicates the solo researcher at its core. Individualisation renders the researcher a responsible actor within a pragmatic system that requires, they say, perpetual questioning. This is anything but a deconstructive aim, nor criticism for the sake of criticism, but rather it is a generative strategy aimed, via a process of rigorous inquiry, towards political transformation and knowledge dispersal rather than knowledge capture.

(...)

#### APPREHENSIVE PRACTICE:

In the act of writing about something, one might suggest that there is a violence forced upon the thing through the judgments and informations brought to bear upon it. I have articulated in the essay, ‘Is this the Helmet of Mambrino’,[xi] that providing a conduit of the unknown and contestable in a piece of writing is to provide a means for imagination and the endless vibrations of questioning to creep through the imaginative process. This process thus allows for the development of multiple of readings – of the object in hand and of the text itself. One might argue that this is merely an unambitious aim – for the violence of knowledge that is

enacted upon these ‘objects’ through writing cannot be shifted and to avoid this violence by creating a space for unknowing is merely a shirk. But this is not a shirk; for any act of imposing information, representation, interpretation or judgment on a thing is interpolative. Even saying, ‘I don’t know’, in some ways, is an imposition as an anti-statement statement. I would argue that it is upon the author’s shoulders that the responsibility for the interpolation of writing is placed. The knowledge and the material that they impose upon a thing written about is always subsidiary to the act of the first imposition, which is to speak – or in this case, to write. As such, the zone of ‘not knowing’ is not a space of negative imposition nor of hiding, but it is a channel cut through the text that humanistically demonstrates the existence of the author. This channel creates movement, according the objects contained therein their pluripotential capacity. Within any text sent into the world like an artwork to echo off the walls of its various readerships, I would call for an acknowledgement of the author’s being alone and being present as its producer. As Derrida suggests, it is because, writing is inaugural, in the fresh sense of the word, that it is in dangerous and anguishing. It does not know where it is going, no knowledge can keep it from the essential precipitation towards the meaning that constitutes it and that is, primarily, its future. However, it is only capricious through cowardice. There is thus no insurance against the risk of writing. Writing is an initial and graceless recourse for the writer.[xii]

Writers that participate in a global art world ridden with hegemony, (one might say, that is anyone writing about art), must negotiate their place within a network of power, plotting their speech carefully and remaining reflexive about the new ‘inaugurals’ of text that they send into the world. Always, at some point, one will be at fault somewhere and in need of interrogation. This is the endless risk of having a ‘dispersible’ practice as writers do. This is not to bring about a state of such apprehension that one stops producing, but to overcome the apprehension of denigration by attempting to live with one’s being always-already-wrong. The art writer navigates a global contemporary art world when this is acknowledged, confronted and utilised as an instrument of development and imagination rather than imposition. It is where subjectivity emerges.

(...)

In 2009 I was commissioned by the Pakistan-based magazine Nukta to report on the second India Art Summit, an art fair based in New Delhi.[xiii] Many Pakistani artists were showing at the fair and though the market in India is significantly bigger than that across the border, its rises and falls reflect on the neighbouring scene. However, if one has a Pakistani passport it is generally difficult to cross that border, and visa versa. So the Nukta editors, taking up the opportunity of my (ability to) visit, asked me to report on the fair as it happened. I wrote this report on paper, on a 37-hour train journey to Bangalore. Hot, bothered and harassed, this strange enactment of ‘nomadism’ was inflicted with a complex series of problems. A small contribution to criticality with regards to its subject, as this text came into being, its critical potential tumbled into the traps of its context. It was not particularly safe on that train. As Bourriaud, in his pressed shirts and air-conditioned hotel rooms expounds on ‘nomadism’, at no point does he consider the danger and the mess of travel. Particularly problematic however, were the politics of travel restriction and liberty that, despite my trials, I was financially and politically equipped to exploit. To a majority of people living in countries like the UK, visa restriction is a largely silent part of the geo-political state apparatus. So in writing this text, I conceded to hegemonies of global power, streams of economic accumulation and the advantage of my privileged mobility. I have also put myself into sites of danger. In this situation, I could not be critical of one object without myself becoming an object that requires criticism. Artist Brad Butler, usefully describes a predicament thus:

'If we had time to acknowledge it, then we would notice that hardly a sentence goes by that does not merit interrogation, hardly an image goes by that does not merit interrogation, unless the decision was taken to suppress precisely that. Which is why so often, for life to proceed, it's a matter of measures not being taken... we are constantly in the process of making ideological decisions to curtail such discussions, in the interest of getting things done.'[xiv]

(....)

#### NETWORKED, (RESEARCH-DEVELOPMENT MODELS):

When I worked for the international residencies and workshop exchange network the 'Triangle Arts Trust' from offices in Gasworks in London, I began to notice that knowledge exchange across the network was becoming an increasingly pertinent issue. Organisers of artist-run gallery and residency spaces across the world, recognising a relative dearth of writing produced within their own contexts, and with that, an increasing demand for information, analysis and criticism of artists within those regions from Euro-American countries, were beginning to strategise around utilising the network to amend this incongruity. Within the network, residencies, workshops and collaborative exchanges not only take place between 'centres' and 'peripheries', but across the network laterally, providing an alternative to the 'periphery'-'centre' exchanges characteristic of the international art world presently. Knowledge sets passed between neighbours such as Bangladesh, India and Pakistan for example, are extremely contested but nevertheless built into the activities of Triangle through its regional networking schemes. Creating an infrastructure for publishing, writing, writers and talking about art is becoming increasingly concerning for organisers of these networks, and as such Triangle offers a site in which strategies for the creation and distribution of alternative modes of art writing can be tested internationally.

(....)

In terms of organisations and networks providing residency opportunities for writers, I have been curious about what this might mean. Partly facilitated by Triangle, I have been able to carry this curiosity outside Europe to meetings with artists and organisations in China, Ghana, India, Pakistan and South Africa.[xv] Each approach to the questions I was carrying would necessarily alter and as such I maintain that no unified project that mobilises such different organisations with such different concerns could successfully occur. Having said that, a network like Triangle provides the networking capacity that would enable such a mobilisation of individuals and shapeshifting research activities that take into account various particularities of contexts that impact on writers and their practices.

(....)

In terms of a research model that might be amenable to widely developing strategies of distributing alternative practices in art writing, FORMER WEST, provides an example. Running between 2008 and 2013, FORMER WEST is a collaborative partnership of European publishers, universities and arts organisations[xvi] that is producing an aggregated programme of events, exhibitions and publications. The project reflects on the political, cultural and economic events of 1989 and the 'post bloc' future. Unlike the documenta magazines project, which, by setting up editorial channels provided a site for the unloading of discourse, FORMER WEST will gather its theory via an evolving platform of collaborations that generate discourse, while reflecting back on itself all the while. Despite its failings, the

documenta magazines project usefully maps and thereby confirms the existence of a lively network of magazine publishing to work through. However, if this question were to be broached on a practice-based and project-based level, then the structure of FORMER WEST would, I suggest, be a fruitful model for a programme of residencies, seminars, workshops and publications that test the changing and changeable place of art writing and criticism within a global contemporary art world.

(...)

Producing critical writing, like producing art, cannot be prescriptively organised into a particular form and this project has sought to develop a politic that can encounter and promote variant writing forms and practices. At the heart of this study is the idea of creativity. Emphasis on creativity is not to debase the urgency of judgment but creativity is considered the safety-rope for any writer set adrift in the world into alien spaces with their judgment and various apprehensions beside them. Creativity becomes a necessarily adaptable guide for any such journey. Central to the rhetoric of the Triangle Arts Trust is a focus on artists's creativity and process; an artist on a residency, unless specifically organised on project-based grounds, is not required to arrive to any place with a research project in mind or a particular work to be made. By no means is this to offer a holiday to participants. It is to produce a space of active negotiation and renegotiation with practice as it is reconstituted in an alien environment essentially shared with others. It is exactly this method of visitation that would be serviceable to the writer's residency, to some extent avoiding the 'studio-safari' syndrome and the often-parasitic nature of art writing and criticism, a syndrome that haunts international critical practice. Networking, 'research' and apprehension of cultural terrain are not of foremost importance in the kind of residencies that I envisage for art writers here. After the focus on process, such effects may be collateral. Residencies and process-based short-term workshops would provide a space for writers to outstep the 'precarious' nature of their profession and produce writing that is based on individual practice rather than editorial commission. When I have travelled I've found that rendering private of a lot of my writing has allowed me to examine questions of practice, assimilation, cultural identification, and so on. The privacy of this process has accommodated sustained negotiation with its own problems and the problems of my even being where I was. As such, my private or even one could say 'process-based' pieces of work have built into case-specific toolbox for my own practice that generates theory around itself and now awaits a variously dispersed future.

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[i] 'Editorial', *Art and Research (Spinoza and Precarity in Contemporary Art)*, 3. Winter 2009-10. <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v3n1/v3n1editorial.html> [Last accessed: 30th June 2010].

[ii] Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, [trans. James Gussen and Lili Porten]. Lukas and Sternberg: New York, 2009. p51.

[iii] *Ibid.* p7.

[iv] 'criticism (as some other practices of the same kind and with the same organisation) works well in the world of cultural flux, changes and "instable creativity" and the university does not... if we want art criticism to become part of the university, why should art criticism become part of academia on academia's terms?... The same questions come over and over (what practices are criticism? what is judgment? how is criticism included in the art market?), but no one asks critics themselves to formulate questions that they would think the most important problems in criticism as a professional experience.' Victoria Musvik, 'On the Virtue of Cultural Flux', *The State of Art Criticism*. eds. James Elkins and Michael Newman.

Routledge: New York and Abingdon, 2008. p307.

[v] Diedrich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art*. Sternberg Press and Witte de With Publishers: Berlin and Rotterdam, 2009. p30.

[vi] See 'Grenades and Gift Horses', ed. Ruth Beale. *The New Sixpenny Pamphlets*: London, 2010. See also, Anthony Davies, Stephan Dillemath, Jakob Jakobsen, 'There is no Alternative: The Future is Self-Organised. Part 1', *Art and its Insitutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborators*, ed. Nina Möntmann. Black Dog Publishing: London, 2006. pp176-180.

[vii] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*. p339.

[viii] Giorgio Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?', 'What is an Apparatus?' and Other Essays, [trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella]. Stanford University Press: California, 2009. p24.

[ix] Colectivo Situaciones, 'On the Researcher-Militant', [trans. Sebastian Touza]. *eicpcp*, (Militant Research), May 2006.

<http://eicpcp.net/transversal/0406/colectivosituaciones/en> [Last accessed: 24th June 2010].

[x] Jacques Rancière, 'Is History a Form of Fiction?' in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2004, [trans. Gabriel Rockhill]. Continuum: London and New York, 2009. p36.

[xi] Gemma Sharpe, 'Is this the Helmet of Mambrino', *Shifter (Pluripotential)*, 16. 2010. pp100-103.

[xii] Jacques Derrida, 'Force and Signification', *Writing and Difference*, 1978. [trans. University of Chicago]. Routledge: London and New York, 2001. p11.

[xiii] Gemma Sharpe, 'India Art Summit: Report', *NUKTA: Contemporary Art Magazine of Pakistan*, 4. Autumn 2009. pp42-43.

[xiv] Brad Butler, 'On Language as Violence', *Kaleidoscope*, 6. February-March 2010. pp64-65.

[xv] South Africa: Greatmore Studios, Cape Town, (June 2008); China: Organhaus Artists Space, Chongqing (November 2008); Ghana: SANSA Artist's workshop, Kumasi, and Foundation for Contemporary Art, Accra, (June 2009); India: Khoj Artists' Association, New Delhi and 1Shanthi Road, Bangalore (August 2009); Pakistan: Vasl Artists Association, Karachi, (August 2009 and February-April 2010).

[xvi] [Afterall Journal and Books](#), London; [BAK, basis voor actuele kunst](#), Utrecht; [Centre for the Humanities, Utrecht University](#), Utrecht; [International Documentary Film Festival](#), Amsterdam; [IKSV/ International Istanbul Biennial](#), Istanbul; [Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía](#), Madrid; [?Museum of Modern Art Warsaw](#), Warsaw; [SKOR, Foundation Art and Public Space](#), Amsterdam; [?Van Abbemuseum](#), Eindhoven. See <http://www.formerwest.org/> [Last accessed 23rd May 2010].