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# Mapping the wounds of the world: dis:connectivities of global representation at the 12th Berlin Biennale

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The title of this year's Berlin Biennale, *Still Present!*, reflected its objective to examine the consequences of the collective trauma caused by colonialism, structural violence and, more generally, the crimes of modern capitalism through a current perspective. Kader Attia, curator of the Biennale, and the curatorial team<sup>1</sup> expand on their approach, namely, to make the crimes of colonialism apparent through the agency of art. Repairing this trauma and the 'wounds accumulated throughout the history of Western modernity'<sup>2</sup> – as Attia refers to it – the reparation process appears as both a question and a tool throughout the works presented in the Biennale.

In this context, the Biennale's global artistic scope will be my focus, which connects as well as disconnects through a range of artistic approaches in its curatorial agenda. Throughout the course of the Biennale, the artistic and curatorial decisions were broadened with numerous decolonial perspectives from various regions, pluralising the global representation. Parallel to the ideas of Bilbao, 'most discourses and narratives that account for the Biennale's globality rely almost entirely on visibility',<sup>3</sup> which is reflected in the curatorial agenda of the recent Berlin Biennale in

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1 Kader Attia, curator of the 2022 Berlin Biennale, has assembled a five-member team to assist him, including Ana Teixeira Pinto, Đỗ Tường Linh, Marie Helene Pereira, Noam Segal and Rasha Salti.

2 Kader Attia, 'Introduction', in *12th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art* (11.6.-18.9.2022), *Catalogue* (Germany, n.d.), 22.

3 Ana Bilbao, 'From the Global to the Local (and Back)', *Third Text* 33, no. 2 (4 March 2019): 179–94.

terms of an approach to globalisation that accentuates unseen local issues in various regions. The issue at hand, as Ndikung points out, is:

*Where is the local, especially in this postcolonial era and context, in the crafting of the concept of global museum? And this local cannot be simplified but analyzed in its complexity that goes beyond national or racial categories and that takes into consideration historical and geographical entanglements as much as geopolitical and social intricacies.<sup>4</sup>*

Entanglements are occasionally emphasised in the framework of the Biennale, which emphasises broadening the perspectives it represents. This framework, which seeks to account for the ‘global’ by combining cases from diverse peripheries, also risks reducing a multifaceted globality to the dichotomies of ‘the West and the rest’ or ‘colonisers vs. colonised’. Recalling the part that situatedness plays in the logic of liberal capitalism, the general intention of global art discourse is to dissolve these dichotomies. As Jacob Birken addresses, the discourse ‘might not solve anything – just make [these dichotomies] easier to swallow’.<sup>5</sup>

When examining the Biennale as a larger phenomenon, a pluralising strategy emerges as the prevailing tool to maintain its position in the global art world. Therefore, the Biennale is often taken as a microcosm of the globalisation of the arts. The curatorial approach of the recent Biennale reflects the general tendency to portray the globe, with its objective of interconnecting the stories of many cultural spheres. In this regard, the 2022 Berlin Biennale fits the general narrative of Biennale-making in a transcultural context, since it seeks to present a comprehensive picture of the globe by focusing on the shared meanings of those affected by oppression and violence.

The globally interconnected histories reflected in the artworks navigate distinctive modalities of artistic production. Specifically, archival practices and the ‘field of emotions’ that Attia illustrates are a frequent tool artists implement to confront the legacies of colonial racism. Here, a ‘field of emotions’ helps to reclaim our present, which no longer belongs to us since it has been ‘colonized 24/7 by computational governance and capitalism’.<sup>6</sup> Attia proposes that the agency of art provides us with the freedom to be in the present. In a similar vein, the framing of art in this context evokes an artistic manifesto.

4 Soh Bejeng Ndikung Bonaventure, *In a While Or Two We Will Find the Tone: Essays and Proposals, Curatorial Concepts, and Critiques* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2020), 186.

5 Jakob Birken, ‘Spectres of 1989: On Some Misconceptions of the “Globality” in and of Contemporary Art’, in *Situating Global Art*, ed. Sara Dornhof et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018), 49.

6 Attia, ‘Introduction’, 34.

When it comes to seeing the globe through a range of artistic practices, thinking broadly about these methodologies raises the question of what connects us and disconnects us. To this end, I would like to gain a clearer sense of what Attia means when he refers to ‘the field of emotions’. One could refer to Dewey’s concept of ‘aesthetic emotion’ through the agency of art experience. This principle describes how, as the artist works with their raw materials, they transform the raw feelings into artistic emotions. Based on the premise that there is no fundamental difference between everyday life and art, but simply a difference in the degree of differentiation and integration, aesthetic emotion is therefore well structured.<sup>7</sup> Since aesthetic experience is made possible by reshaping materials on purpose until a sensitivity to the characteristics of objects can be realised, this process makes it an aesthetic experience rather than simply an experience. Aesthetic experience gives us a chance to engage with our emotions in this artistic playground. These works not only generate a field of emotions, but also produce for the audience a space in which they are able to pause, think and reflect. This space provides the means to identify with the subject at hand and, as a result, engage with it as it’s being recognised.

For instance, Thuy-Han Nguyen-Chi’s work incorporates elements such as a bluescreen, a hospital bed, a boat, an oxygen mask, a portrait and a fire-resistant plant into an installation that tells multi-layered stories independent of a specific time or place. Using a blend of real and fictitious elements, the film follows a woman as she travels from Vietnam to Thailand and then to Germany in the aftermath of the American war in Vietnam. The elements of the installation metaphorically set the ground for an imaginary journey and enables the audience to identify with the subject and the story in a womb-like setting, symbolised here by the boat and the operating table.

Similarly, using natural and synthetic materials like metal, sugar, charcoal and latex, Christine Safatly’s paintings and sculptures depart from the artist’s personal history and local setting to probe social constructions of gender and other forms of alienation. Using allegorical narration and juxtaposition, her works encourage the viewer to relate to subjects of physiological suffering and everyday experiences with authoritarian regimes in Lebanon and beyond. This allegorical storytelling is not limited to this, in many cases, the emotional field presented invites viewers to think and reflect.

7 H. Hohn, ‘Aesthetic Emotion: An Ambiguous Concept in John Dewey’s Aesthetics’, *Ethics and Education* 5, no. 3 (1 November 2010): 247–61.



Archival research and documentary modes of representation also recur throughout the Biennale. Most of archival art's potential is due to its frequent reproductions of alternative historical perspectives, primarily depicting the unrepresented in official histories to challenge power relations and authority. However, archival practices have also attracted criticism for their representation politics and institutional critique. For instance, Hal Foster criticised the lack of critical engagement, 'representational wholeness,' and 'institutional integrity' in archival art. In his article *Archival Impulse*, he adds:

*The work in question is archival since it not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private. Further, it often arranges these materials according to a quasi-archival logic, a matrix of citation and juxtaposition, and presents them in a quasi-archival architecture, a complex of texts and objects.<sup>8</sup>*

Fig. 01  
**Thuy-Han Nguyen-Chi, THIS  
 UNDEAMT OF SAIL IS WATERED BY  
 THE WHITE WIND OF THE ABYSS,  
 2022, video installation, mixed media,  
 dimensions variable, research image,  
 Photo by the author**

8 Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October* 110 (2004): 3–22.





Artistic approaches to archives cannot be limited to these critical approaches since they also enable alternative forms of representation by challenging the normative historical narratives or reinterpreting them. Archival artistic practices reflect unstructured information that is neither inherently linear nor connected, and they admit a wide variety of formats.

Many instances of archival art appear in the Biennale, including the work of Azoulay, who assembled texts and images shot in Berlin right after World War II with some quotations of women who lived in Berlin in 1945. By interspersing these historical documents with her comments, modifications and substitutions, so she uncovers the existence of these women who were excluded from official historical archives.

Similarly, research agency Forensic Architecture's Cloud Studies (2022) investigates how the air we breathe can be weaponised through herbicidal warfare, tear gas, forest fires, oil and gas pollution and bomb attacks from Palestine to Beirut, London to Indonesia and around the United States–Mexico border.

Fig. 02  
**Christine Safatly, PIECE 1, 2019, from the series THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KETCHUP AND RIPE TOMATOES, 2019-20, fabric pierced with nails and pins, Photo by the author**



Fig. 03  
 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, **THE NATURAL HISTORY OF RAPE (detail)**, 2017/2022, vintage photographs, prints, untaken b/w photographs, books, essay, magazines, drawings, dimensions variable, Photo by the author

While these documentary and investigative practices intertwine in many instances, mergers of art and documentation sometimes collapse the separation between the emotional field and documentary practices. Such works often combine political and poetic voices, such as in *Exile Is a Hard Job* (1983/2022)





by Nil Yalter, which involves experimenting with photographs, transcriptions, quotes and videos to explore lives of immigrant women and families from Portugal and Turkey. These practices of documenting, drawing, and collecting involve an open-ended process of tracing and moving with the experience itself, implicating several challenging modalities of artistic production that exist between art and anthropology.

Archival modes of representation employ particular narratives to reflect upon historical realities. They, on the other hand, do not leave enough room for interpretation or engagement with the subject and instead present the audience with the narratives that have already been transcribed. After getting involved in a great deal of documentation procedures throughout the Biennale, one may, in the end, realise that they are drowning in an excessive amount of information that might be hard to engage. I believe that the more room they give for the audience to interpret the subject, the more possibilities for connection they generate. This most likely corresponds to the 'emotional field' that the curatorial team intended to yield with this selection of works in this context.

What can the Biennale accomplish with these practices? What connects and disconnects us globally and interpersonally is rooted in the space provided for viewers to think rather than inundating them with information. Since any dichotomous division does not represent the complexity of the world, such

Fig. 04  
**Forensic Architecture, CLOUD STUDIES, 2022, 2-channel video installation, colour, sound, 26'08", Photo by the author**

global representation fails to question the narratives that have shaped the world. Given the diversity of the art world, it is difficult to identify a single world centre or global narrative that might include all the forms of transformation.<sup>9</sup> To achieve a decolonised representation of art, one must refrain from making geographical generalisations when selecting which parts of history are – or are not – included in narratives. Instead of constraining viewers to a certain time and location or overloading them with information while engaging in documentary practices, the space opened by the poetic core of the aesthetic experience transcends both. That space enables the viewer to connect with their thoughts and feelings while experiencing this artistic playground. Mapping colonial wounds would not be reduced to geography but may be opened to the exchanges, circulations, entanglements, conflicts, and disconnections of the global context.

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<sup>9</sup> Christian Morgner, 'Diversity and (In)Equality in the Global Art World: Global Development and Structure of Field-Configuring Events', *New Global Studies* 11, no. 3 (2017): 165–96.