

[GROUNDINGS]

MAKING NEW
WORLDS:
CONSIDERING
INTERNATIONALISM
FROM SITES OF
LOCAL KNOWLEDGE
PRODUCTION

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[OCCASIONAL]
[GROUNDWORK]

Within the context of politics and social movements, the idea of internationalism has traditionally been situated on the left – think, for example, of the establishment of international workers’ rights. It is only in recent history that internationalism has moved towards the right end of the political spectrum. What used to centre on uniting the working class against nationalism, war, and capitalism has now been integrated into a neoliberal, globalised world order.

The starting point of this text was to consider how the concept of internationalism may be explored artistically from a perspective which does not promote Eurocentrism. How is contemporary art made ‘international’? How do we relate to questions of globalisation and the international art biennial – which periodically brings together artists and audiences from around the world – as a format to exhibit art? In asking these questions, we also embarked on a process of unlearning existing assumptions together with the invited artists who were interviewed for this text. Importantly, notions of positionality, context and conditioning by the Western art system were reflected upon throughout.

The challenge is to rethink our relationship to artistic internationalism and its current integration with global capitalism. What we need to address is the idea of an inclusive and ‘neutral’ space for experiencing different cultures in a specific time and place, and how this space has been formed by a certain (white) gaze and the dominant narrative of Western history. The underlying logic in modern times has been to create hierarchies and fixed perspectives regarding what is perceived as ‘valuable’ and ‘interesting’ in the art market. This is based on a Western context and Western ideas of what we should consider, and which cultural centres and institutions, such as the biennial, are considered important. To critically unpack the idea of ‘internationalism’, we need to understand the standards and infrastructures that are constructed within the art world, and what we mean when we invite people into

an ‘international’ space such as a biennial¹.

Our method and research in this text consists of inviting three cultural practitioners who operate from different localities that are not based in the ‘West’. We spoke to the artistic collective Pangrok Sulap, who are based in Malaysia; the Mapuche² artist Paula Baeza Pailamilla; and the German-Congolese artistic duo Mukenge/Schellhammer.

Paula Baeza Pailamilla lives and works in Santiago, Chile and Switzerland. Her practice takes the form of performances, workshops, and videos in which she engages Mapuche culture to contrast the social and ecological modern condition. The recuperation of ancestral knowledge is key: to achieve this, the artist centres her own body as a carrier of Mapuche memories and history.

The artistic collective Pangrok Sulap often focus on empowering rural communities of Borneo through art. Their methods are based on a working process in which they collectively work with community participation, to transfer and reflect on indigenous narratives and experiences. We spoke with Adi Helmi Jaini and Bam Hizal as representatives of the collective for this text.

The duo Mukenge/Schellhammer function as an experimental ‘guinea pig’ for post-postcolonial thought and practice in the laboratory of contemporary Kinshasa. The duo expose themselves to confrontational situations in changing social systems and situations between Europe and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), capturing and reworking their experiences and investigations in an ongoing artistic process that includes paintings, performance, scenography, experimental video and urban intervention.

1 It is worth noting that a number of biennials in recent years have made a concerted effort to resist this globalised outlook, but these do not form the focus of this essay.

2 The Mapuche people are the original inhabitants of a vast territory in what is now called Chile and Argentina.

To tease out and trouble the legacy of internationalism today, we sought to discuss new forms of artistic collaborations that challenge dominant Eurocentric structures. What came to the fore in our conversations was how the invited artists all approach their practices and circulation of artworks through partial, situated, and limited perspectives. These ‘situated knowledges’, to borrow a term from the scholar Donna Haraway,³ are platforms for the creation of new methods and alternative realities which disrupt the vested interests of Western forms of exploitation through capital and homogenisation.

In our conversations, we found that the promise of internationalism does not hold the same power in the face of globalisation, competition, and extraction of value in the Global South. To reconsider the modern ideal of internationalism and its claim to universality, we asked the three artists about how they relate to the processes by which art is made international and what methods they have created to carve out spaces of self-determination in the face of Western cultural and economic imperialism.

Writing in 2015, the art historian and theoretician Boris Groys posited a distinction between the internationalism as an idea and globalisation in practice:

In fact, contemporary globalization is the direct opposite of the modern ideal of internationalism and universality. The world of globalization is not a world of international solidarity or shared cultural values. [...] Rather, it is the world of the global competition of everybody against everybody. This competition pushes the subject who participates in it to mobilize his or her own human capital.⁴

3 D, Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies*, 14 (3), (1988), pp 575–599. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>

4 Boris Groys, ‘NSK: From Hybrid Socialism to Universal State’, *e-flux.com*, November 2015.

Today, we find that the promise of internationalism has been drastically altered in relation to the spread of global competition and free markets. Mukenge/Schellhammer argue that it is important to dismantle the word 'internationalism' within the art world, and especially to pay attention to what conditions this structure creates depending on which locality you operate from. The duo's practice involves creating paintings and video works that address these issues, but they also organise Laboratoire Kontempo, where local and international artists seek to reinterpret the notion of the 'contemporary' in relation to Kinshasa. This is a strategy to produce theory and art history from an alternative point of view, which aims to challenge colonial hierarchies and Eurocentric models. As they put it:

If we take the context and concept of art and internationalism, we must also look back to colonial history and the structures that nourish certain stereotypes. What does it mean when you say 'international'? In this context, we're already departing from a Western point of view. To be recognised internationally, one must create artworks based on the standards of the Western world. This is why the word 'internationalism' changes in the context of Kinshasa.

As our conversation with Mukenge/Schellhammer demonstrates, it is of the utmost importance to challenge the implicit colonial and imperial histories that are ingrained within internationalism and the art system. 'Just because you are known abroad does not mean that you are an international artist, you are still limited to being a Congolese artist,' Mukenge/Schellhammer explain. With this in mind, we are forced to reckon with the fact that in relation to the locale of Kinshasa in the DRC, the internationalist ideal of universal cooperation and solidarity is problematic.

In a similar manner, the collective Pangrok Sulap also questioned the relevance of what is deemed to be ‘internationalism’ today. In our conversation on their practice in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, they argue that ‘a good artist is someone who does good for their community’. The collective focuses on performative workshops involving woodcut prints with local inhabitants. The function of the internationalisation of their work through the biennial is seen as valuable in the sense that the artwork is a vehicle for storytelling of the local community.

The aim with this text is to explore the complexity and various contradictions of the biennial structure together with the invited artists. Although the role of the biennial has shifted, we cannot underestimate the existing institutionalised structures that have already been created as centres of gravity within the art world. As professor in contemporary art history Terry Smith argues, the term ‘international’ within the art world also has another connotation:

Within the biennial dynamic, ‘international’ usually means *everywhere else*; it means connectedness occurring at scales beyond the immediate reach of the local agents – that is, beyond my art world, and those nearby, beyond my ‘region.’⁵

If we consider the beginnings of the biennial in 1895 with the Biennale di Venezia, the ideal form of a biennial stems from the hope to internationalise local art worlds based on the centres and the peripheries of Europe. Even though the format of the biennial has changed throughout history and has various localities today, the form has implemented a centralisation of Western institutions that wish to sample art from elsewhere, although not necessarily embracing it. This has of course changed throughout history with the establishment of local biennial ecosystems, yet the gravity of New York, London, Paris, and Berlin still holds sway.

5 Terry Smith, ‘Biennials: Four Fundamentals, Many Variations’, www.biennialfoundation.org, 7 December 2016.

Paula Baeza Pailamilla's artistic practice reflects upon how the market response to her work shifts depending on which locality she operates from and how those conditions predetermine her possibilities.

I can recognise the differences between the art market, the economic infrastructure, and the payment in different art fields. In Chile I participate in different projects, however the funding for my artistic production comes mostly from Europe. I feel this borderline, a contradictory situation where the context is very different.

Her work centres around these contradictions, the complexity of how her own body is evidence of the various histories at play: her being a woman, her physical features, her Mapuche name by which people in Chile recognise her as a Mapuche. She experiences being racialised and being part of a nation, i.e. Chile, which has close ties to Occidental cultural and imperial histories:

In Switzerland, where I work, for example, I don't want to say that I am Mapuche because people will exotify you. But in Chile it is very important to say this because it's a political situation and position. I can feel this difference when I change the context, it's more uncomfortable. I can feel how my position changes depending on which context I am in.

But there are also opportunities to utilise participation in the establishment and operate in the biennial format in order to make visible how various contexts and experiences are connected. Pangrok Sulap often work with the local community in Sabah as a starting point to meet with other communities from different contexts. "There are different things we do when we visit different

communities, we always like to hear about the local stories when we visit different places. It's important that we try to relate to see the similarities between our local context and theirs,' Pangrok Sulap say. 'For example, when we were invited to participate in an exhibition in Hong Kong, we wanted to represent our local community. When we are going to a place like Hong Kong, we want to have a conversation with the community there, we need to be local when we go there, we need to meet with local people, the local is global – we are glocal.'

As Pangrok Sulap imply, there is an important purpose to bringing local stories to a global context, where the biennial serves as a platform to reflect on common global issues. According to Baeza Pailamilla, 'the context of the biennial is a very multicultural arena; however, sometimes it creates certain stereotypes. But I believe that when artists can meet in this context, it's very powerful. I think it's important to think collectively in this arena.' She continues: 'For example in Chile, white people with money are often the ones to represent their country. We have an exception in Bernardo Oyarzún, who is a Mapuche artist who exhibited in the Venice Biennale. This moment is important because he is the first Mapuche who represented Chile. I often think, which artists are allowed to be exhibited in this way? These are the elite in Chile, people with money and certain surnames, that are the ones who can exhibit their art. In the case of Bernardo Oyarzún, it's important because racialised people who are outside the elites can see that they also have the possibility to be represented.'

Citing the writer and politician Upton Sinclair, the artist Jonas Staal proffers that 'the goal of the artist at the dawn of internationalism was not to "make artworks," but to make a world'.⁶ This is exactly what is at stake in the practices of the three artists interviewed here. As Pangrok Sulap put it, 'As artists we need to be the thinkers for our communities. We need to be there. We need

6 Jonas Staal, 'To Make a World, Part I: Ultrationalism and the Art of the Stateless State', e-flux.com, September 2014.

to know their stories.’ These artists think anew together with their communities in three ways: making community, building alternative infrastructures and creating discourse ‘from below’.

In a bid to provincialise Eurocentric notions of the international, the invited artists use different strategies to shift the perspective. They argue that the notion of the international is already weighted with a modernist, colonial heritage – and it is oftentimes put into a binary relation to the local. In this power dynamic, the local is seen as less complex, less valuable, stereotypical as well as parochial. Mukenge/Schellhammer argue that ‘For most artists, the international is the goal. The “international” dominates the local discourse.’ They go on to say, ‘The international is not very complex, it’s rather very generalised. And that’s why artists must simplify their practice to enter the international area. The local should be the primary point of departure.’ To decentre the notion of the international, which the art world insists on as the pinnacle of complexity, it is vital to create artistic methods and networks that have their own internal logic based on local demands that reflect upon global issues.

Pangrok Sulap also highlight the importance of situated knowledge production: ‘We invite writers, professors and lecturers from universities to write about our work. Our aim is to publish a book this year, so that we can give this book to libraries and universities. It’s very important to create a platform to spark conversations about our practice. As artists we need to communicate with many different people – not only with the artistic community, but also professionals within the educational field.’ Similarly, the work of Mukenge/Schellhammer focuses on creating discourse around local artistic practices where the circulation of knowledge is key. Inviting art historians, writers and theoreticians becomes a strategy to produce knowledge from the local situation, rather than being ‘interpreted’ from a Western discursive framework.

We should consider who is posing the questions of what internationalism is and what it represents today in relation to the biennial – and why. Through our dialogues with Mukenge/Schellhammer, Pangrok Sulap and Paula Baeza Pailamilla, we found that the history of internationalism and the biennial is weighted with colonial and imperialist ideas of networks, geographies, and hierarchies. The important question raised in these encounters is how to flip the perspective from the institutional ‘top down’ approach to a way of organising and creating artistic discourse ‘from below’. In this sense, it becomes interesting to consider how established institutions become nodes for dissemination of artworks – rather than the sites of production themselves. This is evidenced by how Pangrok Sulap and Mukenge/Schellhammer work with community-driven and locally engaged formats.

Part of this process is understanding and then unlearning how Western concepts, discourses, and forms of institutionalisation condition how we navigate the international art world. This was brought to our attention time and time again in the interviews. Our text was driven by a conscious choice to let the artists be the driving forces behind the argumentation. This choice was about decentring the contemporary art world’s pre-established structures. Again, we see the importance of highlighting already existing artistic methods and networks, which create their own internal logic based on local demands. These local demands are the starting points to think collectively about common global issues. We see how the local is the relevant point of departure to meet different needs. Ultimately, it is clear that local communities and indigenous perspectives play a key role in rethinking and establishing new forms of understanding of internationalism and the biennial today.

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Occasional Groundwork is an alliance of three European biennials EVA (Ireland's Biennial of Contemporary Art), GIBCA (Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, Sweden), and LIAF (Lofoten International Art Festival, Norway) that are each concerned with re-proposing the model of the international art biennial. Seeking a rooted infrastructure for the production and dissemination of contemporary art, Occasional Groundwork serves as a peer group for thinking-through the existing and speculative frameworks of organisational practice.

Groundings is the first public initiative of Occasional Groundwork – a series of co-commissioned texts by writers, artists, curators, and academics, exploring themes of internationalism, sustainability, audience, and infrastructure within the context of the contemporary art biennial and the shift in conditions imposed by the ongoing pandemic.

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