

INITIATIVES, ALTERNATIVES: NOTES IN A TEMPORARY AND RAW STATE

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1. In reality, art equates art event. Or to be more precise, if the artwork is to be effectively presented, it needs to be part of an art event. We are now living in the society of communication. Spectacle is the form. The spectacle, or the event, is the very horizon and the bottom line of “reality.” To hold an event, the institution is an indispensable physical condition. It is also, more importantly, the ideological foundation. **What kind of institution should be created is now the crucial question. This is because the institution is the central element in the power system, or mechanism, that defines the notion and the boundary of art itself.** This was understood deeply by Marcel Duchamp, and is today accepted by almost everyone as the rule of the game. “Where do you show your work?” has become a more telling question than “What kind of work do you make?”
2. **The question of the global versus the local is now the central issue in artistic and cultural debates.** However, the global and the local are not separate entities positioned to fight against each other. Instead, they are two sides of the same coin. They are mutually binding and stimulate each other, creating a continuously changing and increasingly open world. There is no global without the local. The two are deeply interwoven and from their merging new differences arise. In this process of producing new localities, the global is constantly being reformulated as a “summary” of the multitude of singular new localities. No place in the world today is immune from this turbulent movement. It makes our lives much more exciting and, of course, challenging. Art and cultural activities are driving forces of this formidable transformation, and they typically embody all the advantages and all the problems of this global-local negotiation. Every event, including the artworks in the event—the international biennials that have emerged across the globe today are typical examples—should result in the production of new localities in the context of globalization.¹ Cultural differences and diversities are produced by positioning the event directly in the local context. Discourse of cultural differences—especially those of non-Westerners—and of their equal right to exist in and influence the global scene seems to be the commonly accepted new virtue. The production of new localities in order to make them significant in the modern world, or to generate different modernities, is the very root and aim of the actions of artists, from different parts of the world, participating in the “global scene.”
3. **This process internally challenges and alters the established definition and boundary of art itself** because it tends to be (1) multi-transdisciplinary, (2) multi-transcultural, and (3) a merging of art and real life to generate new distinctions between private and public spaces.
4. Further, it not only intensifies but also alters the global communication system. **This generates new paradigms of art language**, which is by nature immaterial, fluid, flexible, ephemeral, and constantly changing. These paradigms echo the current geopolitical situation in which the Empire exists in a virtual but real, fluid, and

¹ See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

omnipresent network, in a shifting in-between space that thrives on the hybridity and conflicts of cultures and identities.² But, this choice should be capable of carrying out efficient strategies of critique, resistance, and transgression against the hegemonic power of the Empire. Unfortunately, the mainstream “global art world,” namely, the dominant art institutions, remain in the high-modernist tradition of the white cube and post-minimalist, post-conceptualist forms. This “transcendent” physicality constitutes a hegemonic ideology and practice paradigm. This centralized power controls the definition, the boundary, of contemporary art and propagates it across the world as if it were the “universal truth,” the only legitimated way, of “global” art.

5. Against such a background, resistance to this hegemony becomes necessary and urgent, especially in places where new local identities are facing the pressure of globalizing powers. This resistance naturally generates and articulates new forms of action and organization fundamentally different from those of the establishment. In fact, a great number of initiatives already have been launched and promoted, and they strongly emphasize the philosophy of “Do-It-Yourself.” Indeed, DIY communities and self-organizations are the main source of sustainability, the main force in the revival and continued development of today’s post-planning cities. The creation and development of alternative art spaces is a perfect example. Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zone shifts constantly between the existing center and the periphery, creating a kind of “emptiness” that subverts the established order.³ This approach resonates with the current global economic system, which is moving toward a new perspective that focuses on productivity rather than the production of objects. Driven by the development of new technologies, conventional modes of production and consumption have been altered and substituted by new paradigms. In different locales around the world, new autonomous zones of economic activities are being established that resist and at the same time contribute to the globalization of dominant modes of production. These zones become an oppositional yet actively participatory force against the domination of state and global economic superpowers. Self-organizations such as international NGOs are now counterparts to the established bureaucratic order, in which transnational and global corporations push for the disintegration of national and continental borders and for the dissolution of state sovereignty. Under the imperial mantle of the new global economic-political power structure, the immediate challenge is how to preserve freedom of speech, encourage critique, and promote different modes of living and thinking. This economic and political transformation has a direct cultural consequence: it reveals the necessity of searching for and creating alternatives to the established cultural institution. To promote cultural difference and hybridity in contemporary art, one must first and foremost consider the need to create alternative contexts, namely institutions, for art activity.
6. Asia-Pacific provides a dynamic example of this transition in terms of integrating itself in the globalization process and reinventing different modernities. The unprecedented speed of modernization and democratization of society in this region has led to self-discovery and to a search for autonomous modes of living, thinking, and expression that stand in contrast to conservative and hegemonic political systems and social values. There are enthusiastic and fervent demands to put contemporary art from this region on the global map. This is achieved through two intimately linked directives: the creation of new infrastructures and conditions inside the region for the activities, and the exportation of these activities outside the region, especially in renowned “international arenas” such as major biennials and museums. This encourages the artists living in the region to develop new strategies, the most significant tendency being the creation and propagation of self-organized

² See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

³ See Hakim Bey, T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, anti-copyright 1985, 1991); also available online at <www.hermetic.com/bey/taz_cont.html>. According to Bey, TAZ is “a certain kind of ‘free enclave’” resisting against the mainstream, state power structure. It is “an essay (‘attempt’), a suggestion, almost a poetic fancy” that encourages “uprising,” or “insurrection,” against the state power. It’s situated beyond all manner of established forms of organization: “The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to reform elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it.” It is invisible, always shifting, “a microcosm of that ‘anarchist dream’ of a free culture.” “The TAZ is an encampment of guerrilla ontologists: strike and run away.” It has a “temporary but actual location in time and a temporary but actual location in space. But clearly it must also have ‘location’ in the Web...” In the end, “The TAZ is somewhere. It lies at the intersection of many forces, like some pagan power-spot at the junction of mysterious ley-lines, visible to the adept in seemingly unrelated bits of terrain, landscape, flows of air, water, animals.” It can bring about ultimate liberation “on the condition that we already know ourselves as free beings.”

alternative spaces run by the art community.⁴ The 2002 Gwangju Biennale articulated this phenomenon by inviting more than twenty-five alternative spaces and self-organizations from Asia and other continents to self-curate and present their works as the core principle of the Biennale project. These organizations are extremely diverse, responding to the specific cultural, economic, and political conditions of their own localities and identifying the very need to be different. This new movement, from the very beginning, was born from the process of artists engaging themselves in the creation of new urban spaces and life styles in light of the impact of urban expansion—the most essential aspect of Asia-Pacific’s modernization. Almost all self-organized artists’ groups and spaces emerge in cities and evolve in their negotiations for particular positions in the urban life. They are often physically small, flexible, and continuously adapting to the conditions driven by urban development. Alternative spaces such as IT Park (Taipei), Para-site (Hong Kong), Project 304 (Bangkok), Loft (Beijing), About Café (Bangkok), Big Sky Mind (Manila), Plastic Kinetic Worms (Singapore), Loop (Seoul), Pool (Seoul), Cemeti Art House (Jogyakarta), and Ruangruppa (Jakarta) are located in the historic centers of their cities and effectively influence the surrounding communities. Other groups such as Big Tail Elephants (Guangzhou), U-kabat (Bangkok), APA (Kuala Lumpur), and Forum A (Seoul), being more “immaterial,” practice urban-guerrilla strategies by occupying temporary spaces in their cities. They all, however, share an interest in new technologies and related cultural strategies as active reactions to the demands of the epoch. Numerous alternative spaces and groups have focused on such a direction. Videotage (Hong Kong) and Movelfund (Manila) are influential bases for experimental video and film production and organizers of multimedia festivals. Project 304 presents the biannual Bangkok Experimental Film Festival. In the meantime, another generation is actively forging the new Asian youth culture and new forms of expression that are deeply rooted in the culture of consumption (advertising, etc.) yet highly critical of this “raw reality.” The complex, often contradictory, relations between artists and their social conditions, especially the institutional infrastructure, have led these artists to an understanding of the need to develop different visions and methods of contemporary art creation. This further pushes them to promote different ways of defining contemporary art.

7. These artists respond to the continuous social crisis of political-economic struggles, bringing to the fore conflicts between the concepts-strategies of immediacy/multiplicity and the stability of established norms. They have proposed new solutions to the global-capitalist problem. At the 2002 Gwangju Biennale, the artists-run gallery and working group Kurimanzutto (based in Mexico City, but making themselves temporary “Asians” by doing a site-specific project for the Biennale) realized a wonderful piece that is extremely relevant to the Asian economic and social context. Ironically calling their project Friendly Capitalism, they set up a space with a blue carpet and a photocopy machine inside the exhibition hall. They made photocopies of the official Biennale catalogue and sold them to the public at a much lower price. By miming the piracy of information products—something largely welcomed by the local public as a means of access to information and new technologies—Kurimanzutto hit upon a fundamental problem in the logic of capitalist systems of production and communication. In fact, piracy and other alternative economic activities are the most efficient and, very often, the only available means for people from the non-West to access technological and economic progress. Thanks to these alternative activities, Asian artists are able to create great multimedia artworks and the public is able to have regular access to them.
8. For various reasons, ranging from personal to economic, from sociopolitical to strategical, these alternative spaces are constantly appearing, evolving, and disappearing, and they ultimately transform themselves into different modes of practice. This is precisely the essence of the new paradigm of “institution”: always moving, flexible, changing, and reinventing itself.

⁴ For information about the current situation of alternative organizations of contemporary art in the Asian-Pacific region, see Pause: Project 1 (Gwangju Biennale, 2002) and Alternatives: Contemporary Art Spaces in Asia (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation Asia Center, 2002), as well as the following Web sites of organizations mentioned above: IP Park, Taipei: <www.etat.com/itpark>; Para-site, Hong Kong: <www.para-site.org.hk>; Project 304, Bangkok: <www.project304.net>; Loft, Beijing: referenced at <www.arts304.com>; Big Sky Mind, Manila: referenced at <www.useby.net/bigsky.htm>; Plastic Kinetic Worms (PKW), Singapore: <www.pkworms.org.sg>; Cemeti Art House, Jogyakarta: <www.cemetiart-house.com>; Videotage, Hong Kong: <www.videotage.org.hk>. Other groups do not have Web sites at this time, but information about them can be found on the site for the 2002 Gwangju Biennale: <www.gwangju-biennale.org>.

9. These spaces have also formed a transregional network for exchanging their experiences and reinforcing their common power base. Meetings and conferences among the various groups in Asian cities are regularly organized. Information, experiences, and visions are published, exchanged, and distributed. Many of these groups have also established wider, transcontinental collaborations with artists-run organizations in Europe, North and South America, and elsewhere. The 2002 Gwangju Biennale was perhaps the most important summit for such networking. It manifested the immense potential power of this new paradigm of art infrastructures and action modes.
10. This new paradigm has been generated through the experiments of artists. In turn, it is deeply informing and transforming both the notion of art and the practices of artists. New languages and issues are hence created and experimented with. This further influences the global scene. If there is an irresistible drive to present truly global contemporary creations in international events—beyond the traditional Western paradigm—the most crucial shift that we should make is first to learn how to present such a paradigm mutation. We need veritable new initiatives and alternatives.
11. Therefore, the question of where to show the work changes to one of how the institution should show the work. To be more precise, how can the institution take new initiatives to bring itself up-to-date with the current paradigm shift? This demands a revolutionary change of vision, one that substitutes the traditional function of the institution as a place of collection, conservation, and (re)presentation for a new role as a site of creation, action, and experimentation. It demands a fundamental change in the organizational and operational model, in the bureaucracy itself. Certainly, we are still far from this revolution.

The institutional initiative leading up to How Latitudes Become Forms constitutes an ambitious project to explore and present current changes in the global art scene, with remarkable openness to the work of artists from non-Western parts of the world. The essential point here is not to manifest that non-Western artists can hold their own alongside Western ones. Instead, the main interest of the project lies in its acknowledgment that Western and “mainstream” institutions need to catch up with the times, to transform themselves into spaces that are relevant to the current shift of paradigm. It's an open debate, and it remains open to new initiatives and solutions.