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Art as Expanded Rationality

João Pedro Amorim and Nuno Crespo

Understanding the Parts

Appalled by the complexity of the world, rational thinking breaks the whole into a set of parts, in order to make analysis and understanding possible. “The multiplicity of forms is reduced to position and arrangement, history to fact, things to matter.”¹ The hegemonic model of Western rationality² is indeed a “rationale for Western domination.”³ The West’s attitude towards nature and non-Westernized countries is one of domination. Its desire is to continuously expand until there is no outside. “The very idea of outsideness is the very source of fear.”⁴ Therefore, everything must be conquered, assimilated and normalized.

Through science, entertainment, religion, and capital, rationality fosters a process of equalization of every difference, which transforms qualitative differences into quantitative values. It entails the subjugation and reification of natural phenomena, communication, spirituality, and value. This system of domination doesn’t descend from a specific entity, but it is itself a network of dominated individuals and disenchanting nature. A variety of intertwined factors—race, gender, class, nationality, etc.—defined historical divides of oppressed and oppressing people. “What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order to wholly dominate it and other men,”⁵ recognizing a “sovereignty over existence.”⁶ And the hegemonic agency over knowledge and reason—hence defining in what consists rationality and what not—is the means of domination.



Ana Vaz, *Occidente*, 2016. Fotograma 16mm transferido para HD, 15 min.

The colonial expansion of the *West* is indebted to the excuse of a civilizing mission, “grounded [...] in philosophical prejudice”⁷ conveyed through science, entertainment, religion and capital.⁸ As the conception of modernization itself is “conceptually *dependent* on particular philosophical epistemologies,”⁹ modernization and progress deemed all the forms of knowledge that don’t fit the Western cannon not only useless, but dangerous. Magic, rite and the unknown, the unresolved, are made invisible—or adopted in a reified form.

In order to create the global, the subjected local cultures are assimilated into the broad sphere of multiculturalism. This global perspective is in fact “born as an effort to bring difference out of the negative column into the positive [while] attempting to render difference cosmetic.”^{10,11} Difference within the Same is a(n economic) value; difference from the Other provokes existential fear and abjection, in particular towards the way these cultures relate themselves with nature and the divine. In order to overcome this dangerous contact with the Other, assimilation and “cultural enslavement” of indigenous peoples across the globe guarantee the safety and “diversity” within globalized society.¹²

While Western art has provided a platform for consistent critique of many of the aspects discussed, it is nevertheless evident that the history of art in the West is deeply rooted in the hegemonic model of rationality that follows the hierarchization and simplification of epistemologies. Content has been central, and interpretation the privileged way to access artworks, through a “spectral world of ‘meanings.’”¹³ Whether a religious episode, the representation of some patron, or some political or aesthetic idea, logical thought is the dominant dimension involved in the reception of art. Even though the pure presence of an artwork and the impact of its forms has always existed, it is often tamed by its supposed meaning(s) and narratives. Such disenchantment of art echoes the disenchantment of nature. Interpretation, like a scientific methodology, breaks the whole into its parts to make artworks docile, understandable and graspable.

A Model to Conceptualize the Unresolved Reality

As some scientists and scholars try to define the historical duration of the Anthropocene,¹⁴ the solution might pass by acknowledging “diverging ecological models that entangle and co-exist across historical time.”¹⁵ Against the *Anthropocene proliferation* of plantations and modes of existence that challenge ecosystemic survival, the *Holocene*¹⁶ *resurgence*. This perspective contrasts a bureaucratic and anthropocentric notion of sustainability—whether we will have enough natural resources to survive and for the markets to keep functioning ‘naturally’—with a ‘meaningful’ one that “requires multi-species resurgence, that is, the remaking of livable landscapes through the actions of many organisms.”¹⁷

We must, however, start a bit earlier: who is this *Anthropos*—this man—and what does he stand for? The geological impact of humans? “But as we know, not all humans have an equal geological impact.”¹⁸ And while it is human activity that promotes such impact, “such a conception of humanity presupposes ‘an internal, ‘dumb’ generality which naturally unites the many individuals’, as opposed to a historical conception of humanity as internally differentiated and constantly developing via internal contradictions.”¹⁹ The more abstract model of the Capitalocene seems to solve this issue, by moving the emphasis from the human species to capital. While the first model ignores the specific role that race, nationality, gender, and class play in measuring the impact of human activity, the later criticizes the intertwinement of waste production with the racialization of waste disposing.²⁰

Both concepts are still offspring of the system of domination they try to criticize. They are examples of “human exceptionalism and bounded individualism”²¹ that acritically propose the human species—or capital—as the single agent of ecological impact. This model ignores that “from the start the greatest planetary terraformers (and reformers) of all have been and still are bacteria and their kin.”²² We cannot consider a conception that ignores the complex “assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors.”²³ Anthropocene and Capitalocene alike seem to signal “a dark bewitched commitment to the lure of Progress (and its polar opposite) [that] lashes us to endless infernal alternatives, as if we had no other ways to reworld, reimagine, relive, and reconnect with each other, in multispecies well-being.”²⁴ Indeed as global apocalypse becomes certain in the common unconscious, the solutions become ‘unthinkable.’ Many of the critiques to the model of Western rationality “share with the bourgeois thinking [they criticize] the same epistemological foundations.” An “epistemological break”²⁵ is necessary to create a possible future that overcomes contemporary challenges. In order to more coherently adhere to a global reality, new concepts and theories should on one hand valorize “non-Eurocentric conceptions of emancipation or liberation,” and on the other propose “counter-hegemonic understandings and uses of Eurocentric concepts.”²⁶

Haraway proposes a new story capable of making us think about new solutions that are not bounded to Western rationality. “We need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections.”²⁷ Haraway proposes the Chthulucene, “an ongoing temporality that resists figuration and dating and demands myriad names” that undergoes constant change and transformation.²⁸ The Chthulucene, named after the spider *Pimoida cthulhu*, is a speculative model for a tentacular, networked temporality of sensation. By “entangling myriad temporalities and spatialities”²⁹ this model overcomes the limitations of cause-effect models that form Western rationality. The Chthulucene recognizes the complexity of connections and interactions between specific things, entities and beings that composes the whole planet. The Anthropocene and Capitalocene propose rational certainties—the certainty of a catastrophe if the current human development is not stopped. Instead of practical solutions, the Chthulucene proposes an ontological solution: to make kin, to reestablish relations with other biotic and abiotic critters, as “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense.”³⁰ This model expands the range of reason making visible aspects that Western epistemologies tend to make invisible—a reality made of “webs of speculative fabulation,”³¹ unresolved and untamable.

Epistemological Break: Experiencing the Whole

Contrary to the old belief that the production of knowledge occurs independently of the “geo-political configuration of the world,” “all knowledges are situated and every knowledge is constructed.”³² Rationality is not indifferent to its mode of production: “The production of discourse under conditions of unequal power is what Mohanty and others refer to as ‘the colonialist turn.’”³³ Those who have agency to define the value of knowledge tend to set the parameters to define it according to their own interests. Thus, as Western rationality “transforms hegemonic interests into true knowledge,”³⁴ it rejects any other form of knowledge that doesn’t fit the super-frame of Western cosmology.³⁵ Western rationality is rooted in theological and philosophical-scientific institutions, so all forms that don’t fit such frame are disqualified as “places of non-thought.”³⁶ The *civilizing mission* of the West was always rooted in these grounds, and as “certain representations become dominant and shape indelibly the ways in which reality is imagined and acted upon,” it was the agent of a “colonization of reality.”³⁷

To resist the hegemonic epistemology, it is necessary to acknowledge that “the Western understanding of the world is as important as it is partial.”³⁸ Western rationality “claims to be exclusive, complete, and universal,” ignoring all other forms of rationality,³⁹ exerting itself through “productivity and coercion.”⁴⁰ It arrogantly refuses to see or valorize outsider forms of experience.⁴¹ Thus, its critique promotes “the expansion of the world through the expansion and diversification of the present.”⁴² This confronts the positivist principle that reduces reality to what “can be analyzed with the methodological and analytical instruments of the conventional [and convenient] social sciences.”⁴³ The colonization of reality consists also in a reduction of reality and the possible.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos identifies *Five Modes of Production of Nonexistence*. According to him, “What does not exist is in fact actively produced as nonexistent.”⁴⁴ This aims at reducing the possibility—and therefore the reality—, by claiming that the “alternative to what exists” is “noncredible.” As a response, he proposes the sociology of absences, counteracting the five modes of production of nonexistence and the correspondent waste of experience with five ecologies. While each mode of production of nonexistence consists in a monoculture of the mind,⁴⁵ the answer must be to diversify the knowledges that are visible and recognized.

- 1) The first one, *the monoculture of knowledge and the rigor of knowledge*, claims that modern science and high culture are the only forms of knowledge capable of creating truth and aesthetic quality. It is therefore necessary to identify other “knowledges and criteria of rigor and validity that operate credibly in social practices pronounced nonexistent,”⁴⁶ that is, to foster the diversity of forms of knowledge and create an ecology of knowledges.
- 2) The *monoculture of linear time* takes the Western temporality—the one in which the concept of progress is rooted—and makes it the rule, ignoring other ways of being contemporaneous. The ecology of temporalities recognizes therefore the diversity of conceptions of time granting “the possibility of autonomous development” to different social practices.⁴⁷
- 3) The *monoculture of the naturalization of differences* consists in the naturalization of hegemonic hierarchies and of domination. An ecology of mutual recognition proposes a “new articulation between the principles of equality and difference, thus allowing for the possibility of equal differences,” that become hence naturalized.⁴⁸
- 4) The *monoculture of logic of the dominant scale* states basically that only the global scale is relevant—therefore forms of knowledge that can’t claim validity in that scale become nonexistent. The ecology of trans-scale leads to a “counter-hegemonic globalization” that elucidates “what in the local is not reducible to the impact of hegemonic globalization” and promotes knowledges that can become the seed to new particular universalisms.⁴⁹
- 5) Finally, the ecology of productivities counteracts against the *monoculture of the capitalist logic of productivity*, by questioning capitalist economic growth—“an economic paradigm based on greed and possessive individualism”⁵⁰—and proposing other forms of production.



Faria e Sousa, 1639, t. IV, colls. 291-292, Illustration of Xth Chant of Lusiads, by Luís Vaz de Camões. In the text of Camões, the Portuguese sailors arrive in an Island of Love (Ilha dos Amores) where Venus and Cupid reward their effort of discovery. In this episode “The Machine of the World” is revealed to them, both glorifying knowledge and the future Portuguese Empire. This episode matches the ability of domination with the social production of knowledge (hence the power to define what is knowledge and what is non-knowledge).

The epistemological break proposed by this model expands the notion of reality by including “realities rendered absent by silence, suppression, and marginalization,”⁵¹ and therefore “amplifies the present.”⁵² By enlarging realities, the horizon of possibilities widens, opening opportunities to different social groups from different geographies to seize the agency that had been taken away by Western rationality.

Expanding Rationality: Art, Magic, and Ritual

Rationality organizes reality in horizontal dichotomies, hiding the vertical axis that establishes a hierarchy between its two poles. One of the defining dichotomies that defines Western cosmology is the body-spirit/mind, with the latter pole being the ascendant. From Plato’s Allegory of the Cave to the separation of body and mind proposed by Descartes, Western cosmology is cursed by an essential (traumatic?) split and based on the exceptionalism of the human mind and the “objective universality of bodies and substances.”⁵³ This is also the principle that creates in Western discourses a division between culture and nature. As “the interval between nature and society is itself social” and “the relations between society and nature are themselves natural,”⁵⁴ we would stand with Viveiros de Castro to claim that “nature and culture are part of the same sociocosmic field”⁵⁵ hence refusing any ontological discontinuity between the two.

As we think of the Cartesian proposal—that one could have their body switched by a machine without any implication to the mind/soul—we recognize how absurd such a division is. Even in its logical-rational form, knowledge and “the multiple layers of meaning [...] are rooted in unthinkable regions of the body, in physical phenomena, in the water of rivers, in the irrationality of chance.”⁵⁶ Rationality, understood in its immaterial dimension, understates how much such knowledge is dependent on the physical. The movement of the body cannot be extracted from the movement of thought, as it doesn’t belong only in the physical world. It is a “paradoxical agent of the passage between actual and virtual, matter and spirit, it is the *mediator that erases the mediations*, thus erasing itself when it operates a passage.”⁵⁷

A complete and holistic understanding of the world must obviously come from the proper articulation of body and spirit/mind. Due to its plasticity, art exists in this actualization of virtuals, and virtualization of actuals. Art is, like magic and ritual, a process of expanded rationality. Art plays with the tension within this dichotomy, and despite adhering to many of the rational discourses of contemporaneity, it does it so in a way of embodying forms (ideas) in material objects and practices. Art is not a mere mechanism of representation, but it is also perceived physically from a specific point of view. Art plays with perspective, which is a property of the body, and with representation and expression, properties of the spirit. Art, like magic, is the actualization of the symbolic, that is, “the symbolic becomes literal.”⁵⁸ Art is a domain that “still has something in common with enchantment.” As “an expression of totality art lays claim to the dignity of the absolute.”⁵⁹ Expanded rationality involves a concrete bodily experience and engages with a subjective perspective. “The experienced experience transforms ordinary subjectivity, making it wed the movement of things itself, creating the surface of philosophical subjectivity.”⁶⁰

Magic and ritual are invisible/ nonexistent in Western cosmology. Yet, Western cosmology is full of myths and rituals. Mythologies make the human experience intelligible,⁶¹ and Western rationality, despite claiming an intellectual superiority, also needs its mythologies. The mythologies and rituals of the West are, however, disenchanted, transformed in necessary actions subdued to productivity. For a start, one can think about the myth of the “invisible hand.” More evident is the expression “magic of the marketplace”, that Ronald Reagan appreciated to preach in every opportunity. Western cosmology is full of such beliefs and mythologies.⁶²

In its history, art has been deeply connected to the means of its production—it couldn't be otherwise! Until the Industrial Revolution, artistic production deemed relevant was almost entirely supported by direct patronage and commissions from the Church,⁶³ hence making any form of criticality a liability for the artist's finances and life. It was only with the emergence of the bourgeoisie, and their desire to adopt the elites' “elevated cultural pursuits,”⁶⁴ that artists could assumedly engage in critical practices—with the recognition of the autonomy of art. That was possible first thanks to the art market and later to public funding. In all these forms, art was either instrumentalized as a symbolic instrument/agent of power (when supported by the Church or patrons), as a moral value of superiority (bourgeois, public funding), or as an economic asset (art market).

If Western rationality, in its dominant discourse, reduced art to a commodity (either economic, moral, or social), the backside of this story is that the transgressive nature of art remains intact in the artworks. Art “is meant to speak past particular understandings or narratives, and all the more so across national borders or creedal lines.”⁶⁵ Images have a power that goes much far beyond its uses, its times, locations, and cultural contexts. That's why we can feel the power of religious images, even if we are unable to understand its codes.

But, if the contemporary regard gaze is able to find in artworks like *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci (the matrix of Western rationality⁶⁶) a form of expanded rationality that resists Western standards, that is mostly because this attribute resides within the beholder. We will analyze how artists engage in their practices with the creation of new approaches to materiality and to the presence of the body; engaging with the imperfect, the unstable, the unsolvable; and making visible knowledges that rationality keeps invisible.

Joseph Beuys · Beyond Intellectual Understanding

In *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt* [How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare] (1965), Joseph Beuys, with his face covered in honey and gold, whispers explanations about images (artworks) to a dead hare. One's first instinct is to interpret what is happening. The hare, a symbol of the renovation of ideas, while dead represents a state of stagnation, and the man, with a mask of gold and honey representing material transformation, verbally explains the meaning of images. Can it be that the attempt to verbally explain an image is the cause of the stasis? What's evident from Beuys's standpoint is that he's interested in "the connection between the visible and the tactual, the experiential work through the sense organs,"⁶⁷ and not merely its meaning or interpretation: "If the theory behind the work was the actual work, then [he] wouldn't have to make something which was to be perceived through the sense organs"; a couple of "logical sentences" would suffice.⁶⁸

Matthew Gandy criticizes Beuys for invoking "a pre-Cartesian and antirationalist ontology embodied in his occultist claim to be able to communicate profound philosophical and historical truths with animals."⁶⁹ Gandy attributes this recent interest in occultism to "the contemporary dissolution of faith in science, rationality, and Enlightenment." It is most remarkable how he resorts to the dichotomy light-shadow that the West developed to discredit other epistemologies and impose its worldview. At the same time, Gandy uses the adjectives pre-Cartesian and antirationalist as pejorative. As Beuys rejects engaging in a self-explanatory artistic practice, Gandy claims he courts with incomprehensibility. The refusal of Beuys to explain his works refers to the impossibility of completely understanding an artwork simply by applying "the intellectual way of thinking in causality." In order for real understanding to happen the beholder and the work should "sink into each other."⁷⁰ For Beuys, understanding means "to stand elsewhere." Therefore, he doesn't provide "iconic clarity" as Gandy expected because that is the place of art before the aesthetic revolution—subdued to its symbolic value. If there are aspects of his work that can indeed be deemed pre-Cartesian, to claim Beuys to be an 'antirationalist' ignores he rejected the hegemony of thought, and not its existence altogether.

For Beuys, the term "visual arts" is "a symptom for the reduction of perceptual categories within the human creativity as a whole."⁷¹ His (anthropological) conception of art follows its multidirectional spread, as "the human creativity potential as a whole doesn't only comprise the recognition criteria in thought."⁷² Human creativity—and therefore art—articulates connections of will, sense/perception and thought categories. Rather than "antirationalist," Joseph Beuys was one of the most paradigmatic artists working in the expansion of rationality beyond positivism. As Beuys builds a "space of non-productive action, that criticizes the materialism of 'capital' and 'reason,'" ⁷³ some of his critics—like Gandy—fail to fully access his work, by foraging for symbolism and meaning.⁷⁴

Beuys believes that "art is there to sustain the organization of human sensory perceptions."⁷⁵ As he proposes the overcoming of reason as the sole means to produce knowledge, he introduces the possibility of engaging in a deeper ecological understanding. Indeed, for Beuys the dead hare recalls the ecological impact of humans. The hare's understanding ability means Beuys understands the hare—"and with it all of nature"—as "organs of human beings without which the human being cannot live." This "external organ" of the human being builds a more complete human being—expanded towards the outside of itself. As hegemonic rationality fails to strike problems that become more evident every day, art could stimulate the production of sensory knowledge and

develop “the inner creative powers [that] advance the present thinking structures through intuition, inspiration and imagination and don’t end with pure intellectual understanding.” On the other hand, Beuys defends a transition from the obsession with progress and its “urge of constant innovation” towards a “connection between the human being and his higher nature.”⁷⁶

Kader Attia · Embracing the Unresolved

Kader Attia’s practice revolves around the idea of *repair*. Attia is interested in its physical dimension, but also in its conceptual, political, and referential sides.⁷⁷ Throughout a wide range of media—sculpture, photography, video—, his works collect a series of different “scars,” trauma, and other indexes of a given wound. Because repair always supposes the wound, the artist believes that keeping a memory of trauma reminds us that the past is real. To make visible, and existent, the memory of a reality that hegemonic forces try to erase allows for the healing process that we need to build a future.

This belief in a traumatic repair, in the reminiscence of a physical index in the body, shocks against the normative understanding of the body in the West. While under several epistemologies, the body is itself a means of expression of one’s individuality, with the inscription of memory on the flesh,⁷⁸ in the epistemologies of the West that doesn’t happen. In the West, identity is conveyed by images created from specters of the body. Identity is then built ideally, designed to create the productive conditions for the future. That is, one projects onto their image their desired identity. As the West promotes a normative set of beauty ideals, upon which success is more often than not dependent, all (significant) marks of trauma in the body are perceived negatively. To underscore this point, it is curious to note how, during the late Enlightenment, the positivist criminologist Cesare Lombroso believed physiognomy could be used to identify criminals through physical anomalies.

In *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* (2012), which Kader Attia presented at *DOCUMENTA (13)*, he gathered a series of sculptures, objects, documents, and video projections that represent fifteen years of his work. One of the key works in this exhibition was the projection of photographs of soldiers that survived the Great War and underwent facial surgery. These soldiers had suffered violent wounds to their faces, which had healed and, through an incipient surgery, were reconstructed in a collaboration between surgeons and artists. The relation between these images to African ritual masks is magnetic: the body becomes a portal towards an immaterial dimension, a higher understanding of reality that includes the memory of traumas past and the embodiment of the world.

All the different elements were exhibited in a position of equivalence, irrelevantly if their origin or reference was Western or not. In fact, one of the fundamental aspects advanced by Kader Attia is this network of connections and mutual influences between cultures. The artist is particularly interested in “cultural re-appropriation,” in the “logical continuity with the endless mixing process that cultural signs generate together.”⁷⁹ According to the Lévi-Strauss principle that “a culture that remains isolated forever [...] can’t evolve,”⁸⁰ Attia believes that “all human culture needs to reinvent itself in order to evolve, adapt and survive in new environments.”⁸¹ That explains his interest in the uses that non-Western cultures make of Western technologies and objects to repair their own, like repairing a traditional bowl with a Western button or a mask with a broken mirror.



Kader Attia, *Repair of the Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures in documenta (13)*.
 © Photo: Hakan Topal

The artist creates a possible platform for the contamination and cross-dialogue of different aesthetics. One might argue that this intertwining of different cultures is the normal tendency of evolution throughout history. And yet for non-Western cultures, to re-appropriate Western elements condemns them to invisibility in a time of Western hegemony. The West has the agency to change, to adopt, and to evolve. That doesn't apply to other cultures that exist in the West only under the specific category of the exotic and the primitive, and any attempt to evolve will be hidden from hegemonic narratives. These repaired objects "embody a sign that results from an act of cultural otherness which tries to re-appropriate the space that was taken from it to create a new state that could be understood as a kind of resurrection."⁸²

For Attia, these objects threaten the stable coherence of the models of representation of the West and the stable ideas that we have about different dimensions of reality. As European philosophy throughout the centuries has discussed innate and perfect ideas, it is only natural that all its forms of production of knowledge—even the most critical and self-aware—have prejudices of what is ideal, beautiful, or interesting. With the reconnection of cultural usages of repair, Attia embraces the unresolved and the imperfect, thus expanding the field of the visible.

Karrabing Film Collective · Practices of Collectivity

“As the tide comes in, coming together.”

—Rex Edmunds, founding member of Karrabing,
explaining the meaning of Karrabing.⁸³

Karrabing Film Collective is a collective of between thirty and seventy people, with ages ranging between two and sixty years old. Their mere existence as an organic collective blurs frontiers between art, life, and political action. They work with, among other things, filmmaking, but also in building outstations, hunting, and rebuilding cars. All members but one are indigenous from the Belyuen community in the edge of Anson Bay in Northern Australia. When the collective was formed, the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli, who had known this community for 23 years, was invited to be part of the group, redefining the traditional—and problematic—role of anthropologists. Their network of kinship further connects to several international curators and institutions. They really represent a “earth-wide network of connections including the ability partially to translate knowledge among very different empowered-differentiated communities.”⁸⁴

The fluid collective is full of uncertainties. It formed around 2007-09, when the members of the Belyuen community were living in tents. Their collaboration started as a form of self-organizing in the aftermath of a land claim, when the bureaucratic understanding of land council decided to break the territory of the wider community into different parcels, resulting in tensions among its members. Their organization was key to resisting the way all this “inherent fluidity became administratively settled under systems of bureaucratic and anthropological recognition.” With the “boundary and heteronormative descent,” the “government demand for certainty” threatened, and still threatens, the existence of different forms of social organization.⁸⁵ The authorities aim at bringing the Karrabing way of life closer to the settler standard, by “severing connectiveness and reducing indigeneity, to what is really a racist and hetero version of reproduction of belongingness.”⁸⁶

By practicing collectiveness in a radical way—for a Western perspective, of course—they expand the capitalist logic of productivity: their membership is fluid and not constant. Furthermore, their practices also engage with different temporalities, through the ongoing ancestral presences. Different families descend from different presences, and the knowledge about their relationship with that (also) geographical place is passed down generations through stories, rituals, practices, and sweat. They believe in an *ethos* constituted by two principles: the “roan roan” or the “particularity of one’s own dreaming”; and an “ontology of connected relationships.”⁸⁷ The articulation of collective and collaborative practices blurs connectivity and independence, sameness and difference, hence countering “the liberal dualism of inside *or* outside, as the same *or* different.”⁸⁸

“Karrabing filmmaking refuses the late liberal capture of all practices by economic rationality or cultural recognition, including the idea of filmmaking as an apprenticeship to a more industrious pathway in the name of individual or community betterment.”⁸⁹ Karrabing artistic practice consists in films and installations that cross everyday life narratives with a confrontation with their spiritual ancestry, representing the crossroads they find themselves in: captured in the present between the pressures of ancestry and those of the authorities. Aesthetically, Karrabing films and installations are raw, presenting vivid images with a relevant indexical value. You can see the characters and the actors behind them, for instance when a Karrabing member represents an official of the police or a ranger. Despite the likeness of these films with anthropological cinema, they’re not as interested in documenting as in creating “new possibilities for ongoing and freely associating agency.”⁹⁰

As they film different temporalities in overlapping layers of different colors and dynamics—not only the present time, but also the ancestors’ time, the temporality of dream—, Karrabing films sprout from their lives and condition. If their narratives didn’t happen, they could have happened, and therefore “are making true something in but as-of-yet unable to define about the world.”⁹¹ But Karrabing are not interested in adhering to reifications of their traditions, nor in becoming “a translation machine or a solution to the representational dilemmas of ethnographic description under continuing occupation.” Their practice is beforehand a relational and aesthetic practice that crosses forms of life with artistic forms, refusing to provide the logical meaning of the representations, shaking the “politics of reception and circulation” through Karrabing methods of “(mis)translation and (dis)orientation.”

The Karrabing Film Collective embodies the expression of an earth-bound rejection of Western-centric expectations. Their practice consists in a profound epistemological break; in the way that they value different knowledges (such as presence of past lives) and temporalities, they resist by making visible their local and particular stories (ecology of trans-scale), by proposing new forms of organization and productivity, and by the simple fact that their practice consists in a form of recognition that naturalizes difference. In fact, their existence as a collective within the contemporary art system demands from art criticism to adapt its models of recognition of value. Karrabing films were not produced to replace the “government-generated truth claims, with counter-claims about Indigenous alterity.”⁹² But as they are “residual artifacts” of “ongoing living analytics that are expressed in multiple modalities, being playful, hanging around, environmental listening, and political scanning included,” the images of Karrabing vibrate with a sense of possibility, of a particular but holistic understanding of the world. By doing so, they evince the “provincial nature of Western ontologies and epistemologies.”⁹³

Ana Vaz · A Body of (Re-)Existence

Who sees? Who is seen? And in the action of seeing, who has agency? The role of anthropologists has been riddled with these questions. As it is *par excellence* the discipline of Alterity, it has been accused of misrepresenting the cultures it studies, of exploiting its subjects and of defining the problematic concept of primitivism.⁹⁴ The films of Brazilian artist Ana Vaz present a series of aesthetic and relational strategies that answer these questions of perspective.

By refusing a “final figure, a model’s picture, a master’s work, a frame or narrative that is Whole,” Ana Vaz creates her own anthropological fiction of affections with “real beings in them.”⁹⁵ The speculative landscapes she proposes unravel the intertwined

forms of domination that define the exploitation of humans, nature, and imagination. In order to achieve it, it is necessary to reconfigure some of the characteristics of a field “notorious for its links to paternalism, colonialism and racism.”⁹⁶ When in 1958, Jean Rouch shot *Moi, un noir*, he challenged one of the rules of anthropology by allowing the subjects of the film to decide how they wanted to be portrayed.

Three years after shooting *The Age of the Stone* (2013)—a film that depicts the construction of an unrealistically huge ruin in the middle of the Brazilian savannah—Ana Vaz returns to the savannah to film *Há Terra!* [There is Land!]. In this film, she works again with Ivonete dos Santos Moraes, a young woman she met during the location-scouting for *The Age of the Stone* and who ended up featuring in the film as one of the main actors. In both films, director and actor collaborate in the definition of the role, leaving behind the objectification often motored by visual anthropology. Further on in *Há Terra!*, Ivonete has control of the camera and microphone in the first eight minutes of the thirteen-minute film. With this, Ana Vaz intends “to destabilize the power dynamic in ethnographic filmmaking, subverting the filmmaker’s gaze and relationship to the ‘other’ by situating within the film the narrative and perspective of the territory.”⁹⁷ In *Há Terra!*, a shaky camera, as if energized by an historical ghost, roams the landscape for refuge as one hears the screams of the first Portuguese colonizers that echo through time.⁹⁸ Ivonete’s character hides from the enacted chase, and wild animals run away from the camera (is the camera a gun?). In the middle of this conflict of perspectives (the Western invaders; the invaded territory and its members) and temporalities, we are reassured by Ivonete’s gesture of (re)existence: her hand touching the land. By stating her material existence, she claims her belonging to this territory and resists.

A different way Ana Vaz proposes a reconfiguration of the concept of anthropology is by reversing it, in *Occidente* (2014). An earlier use of this process can be found in *Rouch in Reverse* (1995), a film where Malian director Manthia Diawara turns the camera to Jean Rouch. This gesture that encourages Africans to be the creators of their own narratives—past, present, and future—is a further step toward decolonizing anthropology. In *Occidente*, Vaz practices her own reverse anthropology. A big blue wave arrives in Lisbon, a camera wanders through the touristic city, a salon where joyful guests have an exquisite lunch served by a black maid. As Vaz fights to “reforest the salon” in a magnetic montage that brings together those inside with the big and diverse outside, “The furnitures come to live, the tables begin to dance: fish, plants, working hands, plates, forks, knives and flesh.”⁹⁹

As the conditions of the present are materially associated with the past relations of domination, by making these elements dance in cosmological tension with the broader outside, Vaz opens an “experience in thought: in-probabilities rather than improbabilities—animistic and imagistic.”¹⁰⁰ In this way, Ana Vaz engages with the theory of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in trying to advance with a “cinematographic multi perspectivism”: “a mode of thinking that believes in the immanence and sentience of all things and in their multiplicity of zones of subjectivity.”¹⁰¹ Perspectivism is the Amerindian conception that believes in “a unity of the spirit and a diversity of the bodies.”¹⁰² This is very present in the films of Vaz, where animals, plants, and even objects achieve an ontological equivalence to that of humans, weaving a network of affections between beings of different species.

This is particularly evident in *Occidente*, with its affection-images in the setting of a great transformation. The camera finds an ally in the gaze of the Maid. The complicit shots where she faces the camera and returns the regard reveal her separation from the other characters, as both she and the camera seem to be invisible to them. This very brief and discreet yet expressive attitude makes visible the productive hierarchy that stems from the history of the oppression of the subaltern. Silent, dressing in uniform, “She becomes symbol and living metaphor to the desire to domesticate which lies at heart of [the Western project’s] libidinal engine.”¹⁰³ Following the *Anthropophagic Manifesto* by Oswald de Andrade, Vaz proposes a perspectivist montage that reveals “the tiger in the maid, the cacti in the hands, thin spikes to protect from predation, domestication,”¹⁰⁴ in a food chain-montage. This is a cinematic embodiment of the “anthropophagic rite, after being captured, the enemy-prey can only be eaten after having become like their hunter and their hunter like their enemy; one being vulnerable to the other.”¹⁰⁵ Resistance is conveyed through anthropophagy, as existence is asserted, and the subjects (re)exist.

The magical anthropophagic rite becomes possible with the coalescence of the consciousness with the body.¹⁰⁶ In these films, the camera is not a tool that registers, but rather an enchanted body that through its movement restitutes movement to thought. This sensitive body without organs is the embodiment of expanded reason. It is thus this sensitive body that transfers its agency to those around it: the humans, the landscapes, the animals, the elements. It is a cosmology of kinship marked by the scars of present and past forms of violence. It is the radical affirmation of this kinship that empowers those depicted under a condition of oppression to (re)exist. Resistance as “maintenance of an existence” that difficultly sustains itself doesn’t seem to be the challenge, but rather the “creation of new forms of existing.”¹⁰⁷



Ana Vaz, *Occidente*, 2016. Fotograma 16mm transferido para HD, 15 min.

Expanded Rationality and the New Topography of the Possible

“This is what a process of political subjectivation consists in: in the action of uncounted capacities that crack open the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the possible.”¹⁰⁸

Art provides an extraordinary platform to resist hegemonic discourses, by changing the paradigm of the visible and therefore redefining the possible. If all the things socially produced as nonexistent become visible—and art has the ability to do it—, the quantity of totalities that make reality expand. If we overcome the static truth and accept the ever-changing network of unresolved reality, the inequality of agency and access decreases, and the possibility to politically transform reality increases. The emancipation of art from pure interpretation, as the modernist avant-gardes proposed with the replacement of the representative regime by the aesthetic one,¹⁰⁹ allows for the expression of an expanded rationality: one that overcomes the Cartesian divide of body-spirit. It creates a tension between meanings and the material expression of elements that installs an “aesthetic distance.”¹¹⁰ This aesthetic rupture is not the “static contemplation of beauty,”¹¹¹ but a form of dissent, an operation of the redefinition of the “common experience of the perceptible.”¹¹² One that can engage with the unresolved complexity of a world full of troubles. And this is the most political of actions: to undo the unthinkable, and create new forms of rationality that can install a new topography of the possible.

Germer claims that he who wishes “to find aesthetic answers to political questions [...] by inventing rather than analyzing social conditions” deludes himself.¹¹³ We claim one shouldn’t undervalue the power of aesthetics. As the discussion about the politicization of aesthetics develops, and artists are invited to engage more directly in forms of political activism, we would like to claim that art can indeed provide an aesthetic response to political problems. “Because for the oppressed, the challenge was never to acknowledge the mechanisms of domination, but rather to constitute a body voted to something else than domination.”¹¹⁴ Western rationality used the production of nonexistence to hierarchize forms of production of knowledge, hence imposing its domination. It is not enough to analyze social conditions; any successful political action has to propose new models of production of knowledge, as a way to create new forms of existence. And to face the challenges of contemporary society, it takes a radical creation of new thinkable possibilities. As mythologies make the human experience intelligible, art must create the intelligibility of the transformations to come.

Art has to learn from ancestral forms of knowledge that were (or are being) subjected to invisibility. Forms of production of rationality such as magic that create a transgression of the productive forces to transform reality. Not by analyzing its relevance under models of causality, but by creating its own forms of rationality. In the examples we analyzed, art proves itself able of operating a new topography of the possible. By creating new forms of existence, it can (re)enchant our connectiveness with the expanded human body: a body made of physicality, reason, will, and an external system of organs (animals, plants, mineral forms, and nature at large). Art, like magic, can come to terms with the fundamental yet paradoxical scar/split (body/mind; nature/culture) that fractures and defines humanity. In this way, contemporary artistic practices can fulfill their political potential by providing a radical platform for (re)existing and making kin.

Post-Scriptum: the Future of the West

It is unclear if the West¹¹⁵ as a center of power remains hegemonic. “Europe is no longer the center of gravity of the world,”¹¹⁶ and it seems that the USA is becoming one of the centers of power within a “polycentric world.”¹¹⁷ However, it’s undeniable that Western rationality has colonized the cultures of the world. Even Communist China is following a development model based in productivity informed by the West’s late capitalism. Throughout its colonial expansion, the West produced a dominant epistemology that socially produced the inexistence of all other forms of knowledge production. Even if the geographical center of this model of domination shifts, the tendency is to universalize a social link of subjection and a *body of extraction*.¹¹⁸ Therefore, the challenges posed above remain relevant in the decades to come, even if their agents might relocate to new geographies.

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Notes

- 1** Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London and New York: Verso [1944]2016), 7.
- 2** Boaventura de Sousa Santos warns us about conceiving the West as a block, because “What is usually called Western modernity is a very complex set of phenomena in which dominant and subaltern perspectives coexist and constitute rival modernities.” (2016:11)
- 3** This expression is borrowed from Lewis Pyenson, though one should note he uses it to refer to the specific discipline of the history of science. See Lewis Pyenson, “The Ideology of Western Rationality: History of Science and the European Civilizing Mission” *Science and Education* 2 (1993): 330.
- 4** Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 16.
- 5** *Ibid.*, 4.
- 6** *Ibid.*, 9.
- 7** Pyenson, “Ideology,” 337.
- 8** “European scientists grounded their work in philosophical prejudice just as devout churchmen did”: while Pyenson only proposes the analogy between science and religion, we claim that entertainment and capital are also intertwined in the epistemology of the West.
- 9** Kwesi Djapong Lwazi Sarkodee Prah, “Perspective on Welfare Rationalism in African Contexts: Freedom and Social Cohesion” *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 9, no. 2 (April 2016): 48.
- 10** Martha Rosler, “Take the Money and Run? Can Political and Socio-critical Art ‘Survive?’” *e-flux journal* 12 (January 2010), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/12/61338/take-the-money-and-run-can-political-and-socio-critical-art-survive/>.
- 11** For instance, the way New Age exploited and commodified different non-Western belief systems for Western use through the appropriation of practices as diverse as Feng Shui, Qi Cong, the Ayahuasca ceremony, yoga, etc. See Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies, Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2012), 6.
- 12** It is worth noting that these processes have been taking place in Europe for more than 2,000 years. Throughout this period, witchcraft and traditional medicine and beliefs were pushed all the way to the margins, leaving the European landscape almost completely homogenized.

- 13** Susan Sontag, *Contra a Interpretação e outros ensaios*, trans. José Lima (Algés: Gótica, [1961]2004), 24. Translation by the authors.
- 14** The Anthropocene is the proposed name for the current geological epoch, which acknowledges the geological impact of human beings.
- 15** Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “A Threat to Holocene Resurgence Is a Threat to Livability,” in *The Anthropology of Sustainability: Beyond Development and Progress*, edited by Marc Brightman and Jerome Lewis (London: Palgrave, 2017), 54.
- 16** The geological epoch in which we have lived for the last 12,000 years, according to the International Commission on Stratigraphy and the International Union of Geological Sciences.
- 17** Tsing, “A Threat to Holocene,” 51.
- 18** Françoise Vergès, “Capitalocene, Waste, Race and Gender” *e-flux journal* 100 (May 2019), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/269165/capitalocene-waste-race-and-gender/>.
- 19** Marx cited in Daniel Hartley, “Against the Anthropocene,” *Salvage*, August 31, 2015, <https://salvage.zone/in-print/against-the-anthropocene/>.
- 20** Vergès, “Capitalocene, Waste.”
- 21** Haraway, “Tentacular Thinking.”
- 22** Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* vol.6 (2015): 159.
- 23** Ibid.
- 24** Haraway, “Tentacular Thinking.”
- 25** Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 8.
- 26** Ibid.
- 27** Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene,” 160.
- 28** Haraway, “Tentacular Thinking.”
- 29** Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene,” 160.
- 30** Ibid., 162.
- 31** Ibid., 160.
- 32** Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26(7-8) (2019): 2.
- 33** Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, [1995] 2012), 114.
- 34** Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 265.
- 35** Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience,” 6.
- 36** Ibid., 3.
- 37** Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 105.
- 38** Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 262.
- 39** Ibid., 266.
- 40** Ibid., 268.
- 41** Ibid., 269.
- 42** Ibid., 270.
- 43** Ibid., 271.
- 44** Ibid.
- 45** Vandana Shiva links knowledge systems to ecosystems. If globalized plantations threaten the biodiversity of the planet by transforming diverse habitats into a policed one-species agriculture, a globalized epistemology certainly threatens the existence of local not aligned alternatives. Vandana Shiva, “Monocultures of the Mind,” *Trumpeter* vol. 10, no. 4 (1993).
- 46** Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 277.
- 47** Ibid., 278.
- 48** Ibid., 280.
- 49** Ibid.

- 50** Ibid., 283.
- 51** Ibid., 284.
- 52** Ibid., 289.
- 53** Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Os Pronomes Cosmológicos e o Perspectivismo Ameríndio,” *MANA* 2, no. 2 (1996): 116. Translation by the authors.
- 54** Ibid., 121.
- 55** Ibid., 124.
- 56** Gil, *Caos e Ritmo*, 50.
- 57** Ibid., 201.
- 58** Ibid., 56.
- 59** Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 19.
- 60** Gil, *Caos e Ritmo*, 193.
- 61** Ibid., 48.
- 62** Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957) collects a series of examples from the press, art, and common sense that seem to ‘naturalize’ ideological processes. Rather than intentional, the ideology produced everyday by media and other contemporary agents reproduces Western rationality.
- 63** Rosler, “Take the Money.”
- 64** Ibid.
- 65** Ibid.
- 66** The art of the Renaissance used a series of matrixes and formulas—like the golden ratio—in order to achieve an ideal representation of the world.
- 67** Joseph Beuys, interview by Adolf Holl, *Club 2*, January 27, 1983, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_VPN8M1SGw.
- 68** Ibid.
- 69** Matthew Gandy, “Contradictory Modernities: Conceptions of Nature in the Art of Joseph Beuys and Gerhard Richter,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87, no. 4 (1997): 646.
- 70** Beuys, *Club 2*.
- 71** Joseph Beuys in Werner Nekes and Dore O., *Beuys*, film, published by Werner Nekes, 1981.
- 72** Ibid.
- 73** Isabel Jasinski, “As cinzas de Beuys em Bellatin e o ritual da lebre morta: articulações do humano e do animal pela linguagem artística,” *Caracol*, no.17 (June 2019):140. Translation by the authors.
- 74** More interesting is the critique by Stefan Germer of Beuys’ reluctance in addressing the context of his artistic production within the institutional framework, after Marcel Broodthaers. See Stefan Germer, “Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys,” *October* 45 (Summer, 1988). We will not have the opportunity to address this criticism, but we’d like to remark, that, unlike another critic claims, the art world is not “the prime and final sphere of his operations.” See Benjamin Buchloh, “Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol,” *Artforum* 18, no. 5 (January 1980). For Beuys, art is an intrinsic and fundamental dimension of humanity—and not a particular political and economic system. Even though relevant within the framework of the politics of art, this critique doesn’t concern directly the angle by which we are analyzing Beuys’ work—but indeed he benefited from the art world without engaging in its critique.
- 75** Beuys, *Club 2*.
- 76** Ibid.
- 77** Kader Attia, “Las cicatrices nos recuerdan que nuestro pasado es real,” Fundació Joan Miró, June 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbnWpishstk>.
- 78** Viveiros de Castro, “Os Pronomes Cosmológicos,” 131.
- 79** Kader Attia, “Open Your Eyes: ‘La Réparation’ in Africa and in the Occident,” *Third Text* 32, No.1 (2018): 16.

- 80** Lévi-Strauss cited in Attia, “Open Your Eyes.”
- 81** Ibid.
- 82** Ibid., 30.
- 83** Tess Lea and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “Karrabing: An Essay in Keywords,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 34, no.1 (Spring 2018): 41.
- 84** Donna Haraway cited in Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “After the End, Stubborn Affects and Collective Practices,” Sonic Acts Festival 2019 – Hereafter, February 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B39F2duTlJ4>.
- 85** Lea and Povinelli, “Karrabing,” 42.
- 86** Povinelli, “After the End.”
- 87** Ibid.
- 88** Lea and Povinelli, “Karrabing,” 37.
- 89** Ibid., 42.
- 90** Ibid., 43.
- 91** Ibid., 41.
- 92** Ibid., 43-44.
- 93** Povinelli, “After the End.”
- 94** Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies, Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 70.
- 95** Ana Vaz, “Ana Vaz: Occidente,” interviewed by Olivier Marboeuf, *Vdrome*, March 20, 2016, <https://www.vdrome.org/ana-vaz-occidente>.
- 96** Manthia Diawara, *Rouch en Reverse*, film, 1995.
- 97** “Ana Vaz, Há Terra!,” accessed March 1, 2020, <https://kadist.org/work/ha-terra/>.
- 98** The screams (“There is land!”) come from Manoel de Oliveira’s *Francisca* (1981).
- 99** Vaz, “Ana Vaz: Occidente.”
- 100** Ana Vaz, “NYFF Interview: Ana Vaz,” interviewd by Aily Nash, *Film Comment*, September 29, 2015, <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-ana-vaz-occidente/>.
- 101** Ibid.
- 102** Viveiros de Castro, “Os Pronomes Cosmológicos,” 116.
- 103** Vaz, “Ana Vaz: Occidente.”
- 104** Vaz, “NYFF Interview.”
- 105** Ibid.
- 106** It emulates the writings of José Gil about yoga (*Caos e Ritmo*, 203-222) according to which certain techniques that explore this coalescence allow for a transformation of the properties of the body.
- 107** Marina dos Santos Ferreira, “Re-existir e a insurgência de Natividade,” *revista landa* 7, no. 2 (2019): 73.
- 108** Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London, New York: Verso), 96.
- 109** Jacques Rancière, *O destino das imagens*, trans. Luís Lima (Lisbon: Orfeu Negro, 2011), 103. Translation by the authors.
- 110** Jacques Rancière, *O Espectador Emancipado*, trans. José Miranda Justo (Lisbon: 2010), 85. Translation by the authors.
- 111** Ibid.
- 112** Ibid., 95.
- 113** Germer, “Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys,” 66.
- 114** Rancière, *O Espectador Emancipado*, 93.
- 115** It is worthy to note that the division between East and West is itself a Western invention.
- 116** Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2017).
- 117** Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience,” 10.
- 118** Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 4-18.

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