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Invisible Culture

An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture

On the edge of the field or inside the plane: Airplanes and Artworld Revisited

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The following two advertisements were published last Fall, soon after September 11th, on the art world e-mail list e-flux.com:

Before you travel to the fall art shows in Europe, brush up on the latest news in contemporary art with the new issue of *tema celeste*. In case you forget to buy one before you leave, come visit our booths at Art Forum Berlin and FIAC and we'll bring you up to speed.[1](#)

Tap into *Flash Art's* latest on the pulse of Contemporary Art. This October we offer... on location reportage on the First Yokohama Triennial, the inside story on the upcoming Bienal de Sao Paulo, and the latest batch of Young British Art in this issue's Aperto... Also, in this issue, read off-the-cuff responses to the September 11th tragedy and its impact on Contemporary Art.[2](#)

The first of the two announcements did not reflect the tragic event and its aftermath at all. Maybe it had been written well before, maybe the copywriter didn't have a chance to react. However, when I read it on the 28th of September, I could not help feeling appalled. In that very context the *tema celeste* ad formed a perfect picture of the art world at its worst: a sphere of travel and high speed, where the art follower only has time to hurriedly browse the latest news from the glossy pages of Western ("international") art magazines while popping from one "booth" to another at art fairs and exhibitions.

The second advertisement, for *Flash Art*, on the other hand, managed to combine the hectic pulse of the art world and the idea of globetrotting (from Yokohama to Sao Paulo to Britain in Venice) with the faint reminiscence of September 11th. Somehow the combination, plus the blithe expression "off-the-cuff" in terms of

responses did not make this ad any more convincing in terms of the art world's reflexivity or self-reflexivity.

Of course advertising is advertising, and its basic function is to sell. But if the art world still wants to present itself as a place or space for thinking about ethics and politics, I'd like to think that we could expect some kind of ethico-political consciousness in art journals and their marketing strategies as well. I'll take one more example of ads for art journals from last Fall. *Artforum's* November issue was advertised in the following words:

Artforum is pleased to announce the November issue, featuring 'Reading 9-11-01.' Find out which books Charles Simic, Anne Carson, Homi Bhabha, Barbara Kruger, William Gass, Arthur Danto, and a dozen other prominent voices in the arts turned to in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks. --- stills from Wolfgang Staehl's untitled live-feed webcam panorama of lower Manhattan, which, as chance would have it, was impassively recording a skyline dominated by the Twin Towers at 8:45 a.m. on September 11.[3](#)

Artforum had obviously made an effort to seriously ponder the aftermath of attacks, but why use the word *pleased* in this occasion? Doesn't it sound self-serving? And why describe the participating artists and intellectuals as "prominent voices in the arts"? Does it matter in this context what kind of positions these people have in the hierarchies of the art world and the academia? And had we not already been drowned under the endless flow of images recording the planes as they crashed into the WTC towers—even without Staehl's pictures published by *Artforum*?

The reference to crashing planes finally brings me to the origins and genealogy for this piece of writing. I am a Finnish researcher of visual culture, I used to be a practicing critic (1987-92), and I've been curating and co-curating exhibitions occasionally since the early nineties. The accelerating globalization of the art world in the late 1990s, together with my growing academic interests, have managed to wean me little by little from my active position in the field of contemporary Finnish art. This text is part of a long process during which I have been wondering and re-evaluating the changing terms of critical and/or curatorial agency in the art world.

When I wrote the very first draft of this piece, it was the end of March 2001. I had been asked to do something for the spring catalogue of one a Finnish art school, and to some words for young artists starting their careers.[4](#) I had chosen the airplane for my key metaphore through which I would illustrate some problems concerning the contemporary Western art world. Of course times were very different then. I was able to write about the airplanes in a much more ironic manner

then than I can do now. But since the planes and the air traffic are, nevertheless, definitely connected to some of the issues I was wondering about then, and since the same issues continue to bother me, I think my chosen metaphor is still apt. However, the recent and ongoing horrific events in the world politics—as well in the United States and in Afghanistan, as in the Middle East where the Israeli army continues to use the notorious Apache helicopters as tools for occupation—have had their bearings on this piece of text. Thus my writing about the aircraft cannot only remain on a metaphorical level. Especially since in the end of my paper I will touch the very concrete issue of death brought by planes.

Re-touching my words now, in the end of April 2002, I notice that the fact that the art world so often causes a strong feeling of unease to me, for it is connected with certain disturbing practices: the import-export business (as usual), no matter what the situation might be in the world at large, and the embarrassing nationalism occurring side by side with often quite ruthless-looking globalization. Just think about the art Olympics happening at the Venice Biennial in its national pavilions... and then, again, about the need of art world agents to travel ceaselessly around the world in order to master the expanding field of contemporary art. I think it would be useful, now and then, to pose to us (critics and curators alike) some ethical questions concerning, among other things, economic and environmental issues, and the internationalized inter-art hierarchy produced by ourselves: curators, museum people, critics and artists. What does this do to art produced in this kind of conceptual frame? What happens to the relationship between artists and their audiences (i.e. to the situatedness of art) if the idea of audience is formed by some vague notion of an “international art audience,” not by local communities? Are we facing an era of neo-modernist universalism after several decades of postmodern and post-colonial criticism?

One specific example of the economically and environmentally not-so durable art world practices would be the ever-increasing shuttling and biennial-hopping of curators, gallerists, critics and artists. Personally suffering from a severe fear of flying, from politically correct ideas of not polluting the air whenever I can avoid it, from limited economical chances for travelling, and also from a severe reluctance to network for networking's sake, I have to carefully consider every single trip I make. But then again, I am not a career-wise art world practitioner. How many biennials or triennials presenting contemporary art are there nowadays? Manifesta, Havana, Venice, Sydney, Istanbul, Whitney, Capetown, Yokohama, Florence, Sao Paulo, Johannesburg... How many of them does one have to visit on a regular basis to maintain the status of a seriously-taken curator or critic, gallerist or museum director? Seriously, how much kerosene do we burn while struggling for that status?

Airplanes do, of course, take off and stay airborne anyway. But since the 1990s

they have been carrying on board an increased number of art world agents. It is no accident that the cover design of a recent book including interviews with ten international curators, *Focii* by Carolee Thea,⁵ reproduces Alighiero e Boetti's piece *Cieli ad alta quota* from 1993. The piece was compiled in cooperation with Austrian Airlines and Asea Brown Boveri. The images used by the artist represented planes in the blue sky, and these sky-views were then made into jigsaw-puzzles. These jigsaw-puzzles, the size of the folding tables in the airplane, might easily be interpreted as representations of the art world in a nutshell. In the beginning of the third millennium *airfields*/airports and planes have become an essential part of the *art field*; they have become more and more important parts in the art machine. We are to witness the phenomenon of busy curators popping in and out, visiting countries and cultures previously unknown to them, taking in the most "interesting" contemporary art wherever they land. The term *interesting* in this case refers to the artists and works that the local gatekeepers oligarchically filter and serve to the visitors, the self-appointed nomads. Very few exhibition assemblers have the opportunity to stay anywhere long enough to personally assess the situation, to encounter the cultures, and to look for something less official, something that someone else has not already judged to be acceptable. Something that has not been given the mystically quality-guaranteeing expert's appraisal by some eminent arbiter of art. It seems that art becomes so much more important when important people present it in proper circumstances.

One way to avoid the methodical trap of the hectic globetrotting, and the oligarchical features connected to it, is to make use of the evolving system of residencies. Settling down for a longer period of time gives you a chance to put the art you see in the context of everyday social phenomena, or in the specific structure of power in which that art gets constructed. Of course you can never get rid of the web of power formed by the local art world, but you might get a different perspective which may even affect your own way of thinking, your politics and ethics. Another way of doing curating "differently" is to build the exhibitions through a vast collaboration with other curators working in their own contexts, and trusting their judgment in terms of choices. The Turkish curator Vasif Kortun has described this approach which he applied to his own curatorial work when working for the third Istanbul Biennial:

I didn't have the budget or the knowledge to curate the whole exhibition myself. — As a curator living in Turkey I didn't have the audacity to fly all over the globe and bring everything here, as I do not believe one can understand a country in a three-day visit. So I went to artists and curators and tried to build a community of understanding. These people were great and I became a conduit.⁶

Strangely enough, the selective curator tourism often connects with the issue of gender. Laurie Anderson once shared with her audience a story telling a lot about the closed-circuit gender system in the American film industry. The story went approximately like this: There were two young guys, a scriptwriter and a director, having lunch in Los Angeles. One said to the other: "Hey, we should make a movie together!" And the other replied: "Hey, that's a great idea! What should we make it about?" The first one thought for a moment and then exclaimed: "I know! Let's make it about two guys!"

Anderson's story reminds me of the worst kind of scenario on how things easily "just happen" in the art world: exhibitions are organized not because the curators are necessarily passionate about the themes they are working on, but because these themes have been dealt with in major international art exhibitions. The artists do not necessarily get hand-picked to the shows because of the intensity or subversiveness of their work according to the personal interpretation of the curator; they just might get selected from a bunch of people who have already been selected for these occasions many times before. Needless to say, this may cause e.g. gender imbalance in the representation of female and male artists—a problem we have not quite gotten rid of in the art world, no matter how enlightened and gender-conscious many members of this community are. We need to ask ourselves why this pattern of picking men over women is continuously re-enacted despite the attempts to reposition gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, and class in our society. A very discouraging example indeed is the latest Scandinavian Carnegie Award; the Finnish candidates to make it to the shortlist and to the Carnegie exhibition, six of them, are male artists. And these candidates come from a country in which a) the equality between the genders *seems* to be a widely accepted societal aim and b) there are many female artists with an exciting oeuvre. I find it symptomatic, as well, that the issue of gender is still more often brought up in the art talk dealing with women than in the discourse constructed around male art world practitioners. This applies also to aforementioned Carole Theea's book *Foci*, where only two curators out of ten are willing to discuss gender at (any) length. Both of these curators, Japanese Yuko Hasegawa and Spanish Rosa Martínez, are women.⁷

It might be that I have been criticizing the international exhibition system too hard. It is marvelous that new biennials and triennials are appearing on the art map, as this could be seen as a sign of the breaking down of the traditional Euro-USA-centered order of the art world. But then again, it is quite deplorable if the same works of the same artists (be they European, American or from any other part of the world) just get dragged to an ever-increasing number of exhibitions. And thereby the same audience of Western international jet-set experts have chance to see the same works everywhere. This way, the Western paradigm of contemporary art just gets forced onto the rest of the world, and in my book this means that the

Western art world continues to practice a kind of cultural neo-colonialism—not to mention the logic of the same. Ironically enough, one of the exhibition themes repeatedly used in several occasions has been multiculturalism, post-colonialism, or the encounter with the “other.” An important theme indeed, but rapidly losing its interest if realized by presenting an international top-50 artists again and again. A reverse phenomenon is the representational fabrication of “national identities”, a good example of which is the “New British Art,” or the way in which “Finnish photography” has become known outside Finland. Many of the curators, fascinated by “the Finnish miracle,” happily pick the same artists over and over and take their work to Venice, Sao Paolo, Istanbul...

Yet the post-colonial issues can, of course, be effectively analyzed in an art exhibition, if the theme is pressing and weighty enough, even vital, for the curator/s. As Vasin Kortuf has ironically pointed out: “[N]ot all cultural translators in the so-called Third World are colonialists, self-colonializing agents, or culturally dominant elites.”⁸ One can take for instance *The Short Century*, the show curated by Okwui Enwezor and presented at the P.S. 1 in New York in the Spring 2002, as an example of a thoroughly thought and well-organized excursion into the problematics of colonialization, racialization and post-colonial politics. An excursion which does not settle for generalizing notions of “Africa,” but contextualizes the shown artworks through cultural differences and particularity which are to be found in the vast continent and its post-World War II history.

The whole spinning of the international art roulette—the fact that the curators and artists can, again and again, take a taxi to the airport and board a plane, instead of wait on the edge of the field—is of course also a sign of art having had its share of the late 1990s economic boom, thus enjoying the fruits of the post-industrial too-late-capitalism. At the same time, however, I suppose many a modernist art practitioner would still like to see art as a pure sphere, separate from economy and politics, as the last sphere of freedom. And yet numerous artists work in financially grim circumstances, and support themselves doing (other) odd jobs, not surviving by making their art because they do not belong to the group of quality-makers certified by the experts.

After having said all of the above, I would still like to pay attention to the other side of the coin. It is not only that some art events, like Art Basel Miami Beach in Florida were postponed after the “911” because of “the unsafe circumstances and the state of war.”⁹ For instance The Santa Fe Art Institute did offer relief residencies for artists whose living or working space had been compromised or destroyed by the September 11th attacks.¹⁰ The Museum of Civilization in Quebec did *not* cancel the Arab-Canadian exhibition *The Lands Within Me* in its aftermath.¹¹ And now, many months later, while we have had to witness the escalating violence in

the Middle East, there have been several petitions for peace and critical comments on Israeli occupation on the Internet, presented by individual artists and artists' groups alike. None of these messages have reached me through e-flux, though, but through personal contacts. Among these acts of Net-activism is an interview of a friend of mine, Israeli-born artist Meir Gal, living and working in New York. In the interview Meir describes one of his latest works, "Arms Pit," a photograph where the hair of the artist's underarm looks like a map of Israel:

The work involves a play on words. In British English, an arms pit is a weapons cache. But the work relates to Israel not only as a place with enough of an arsenal to bring down much of the planet. I also want to get at the way the state insinuates and implants itself, with its doctored history, in the consciousness and body of its citizens. The use of my body, with the map in my armpit, is meant to express how the people of Israel are branded in their flesh like cattle, with the result that they surrender their personal freedom and their right to build a different identity from the one imposed by the state.[12](#)

Meir, dramatically using his own body as a metaphor for the body politic, is one of the artists, critics and curators who are responding to the frightening situation around us through affective and analytical acts. The work of these people still convinces me that, while the art field may appear like an alienating, talent-hunting machine when observed from the edge, it simultaneously offers ample opportunities for creating significant particles for the meaning production that surrounds us. Art, and the words entangled with it, can make us more politically sensitive. It may help us not only to deliberate on and build up our own identity, but also to see and experience things in other ways and through the eyes of others. Art can equally portray, and be involved in, the humblest aspects of everyday life, as well as offer access to the threshold of the sublime—sometimes it can do both at the same time. Art can be overtly critical and present alternatives. Because art can never be separated from power, it offers an interesting route to endless power relations; even an opportunity to act, to make a difference. Art moves us, no matter where we are located or positioned: on the field, on the edge of the field, or on the plane.

Yes, art moves us. I will give you yet another example, and as a kind of a Post Scriptum I will now take a very different angle on planes and art.

Michel de Certeau described the view from New York's World Trade Center in the following words:

Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center.

Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passes over Central Park and finally undulates off into the distance beyond Harlem. A wave of verticals. Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. It is transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide—extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today's urban irruptions that block out its space. Unlike Rome, New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future. A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding.[13](#)

Michael Richards, a sculptor, also an old friend of mine, had his studio on the 92nd floor of the World Trade Center until the 11th of September. That very morning he was at his studio, preparing an upcoming show, when his world exploded.

In the 1990s, Michael had been persistently dealing with the fate of Black American pilots in the Second World War: heroes in the air, without civil rights on the ground. In 1996 the Studio Museum in Harlem presented his work in an exhibition entitled *To Carry me Home*. His work included sculptures and installations representing planes trying to escape the battle... as in the series *Escape Plan* (1996) [\[Fig. 1\]](#).

He represented a pilot pierced by tiny planes, and found a parallel for this figure from Western mythology and the history of art: *Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian* (1999) [\[Fig. 2\]](#). He sculpted the broken body of Icarus, and titled the piece *Great Black Airmen (Tuskegee)*, (1996) [\[Fig. 3\]](#). What did they tell about Icarus? I quote Michael from a text connected to his series *Escape plan*: "The feathers he saved in secret, hiding them until he had enough to form a ladder. But his feet were sensitive and his laughter gave him away."

His feet were sensitive and his laughter gave him away.

Obviously the show Michael was working on will never take place as such. The airplanes became more than real for him. The day I heard that he had died, I could not have cared less about the art world, its planes and biennials, its networks and

my own position within them. But I cared immensely about his art, about the things he said and showed in his works: about cultural, social and political struggle. And I still care.

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1. info@e-flux.com, 28 Sept 2001. ↑
2. info@e-flux.com, 5 October 2001. ↑
3. info@e-flux.com, 1 November 2001. ↑
4. Shorter versions of this essay have been published in *Versio 2.0*. (The catalogue for graduating art students' show at the Lahti Polytechnic, 2001) and in *Critic's News 2/02*. (The journal of Finnish Art Critics' Association). The issue of *Critic's News* included the proceedings for the *Nordic-Baltic Critics' Symposium: Consumerism and New Media in the Visual Arts*, which took place in Helsinki in November 2001. ↑
5. Carolee Thea, *Foci: Interviews with ten international curators* (New York: Apex Art Curatorial Program, 2001.) ↑
6. Kortun in Carolee Thea, *Foci*, 58. ↑
7. Thea 2001, p. 47-51 (Hasegawa) and 84-87 (Martínez). ↑
8. Kortun, in Thea 2001, 59. ↑
9. info@e-flux.com, 5 Nov 2001. ↑
10. info@e-flux.com, 21 Sept 2001. ↑
11. info@e-flux.com, 8 October 2001. ↑
12. <http://www.hanitzotz.com/challenge/72/Gal.html> ↑
13. Michel de Certeau (1984/1989). *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 91. ↑

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