

## The Cosmos in Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism

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### *Teaser*

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### *Kurzbio*

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## *The Cosmos in Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism*

Cosmopolitanism is an idea of our place in the world and an ideal of how to belong with other people. At its most utopian level cosmopolitanism proclaims a form of belonging that is free of boundaries and is open to the sensory awareness of the universe. It proposes the widest possible sphere of belonging and freedom. In this essay I seek to explore the extent to which the world making activity of contemporary art is a form of the cosmopolitan imaginary. I will focus on the idea that the Biennale is a kind of world making activity and part of our cosmopolitan imaginary. I will also deploy the term cosmos in cosmopolitanism to address three forms of world making activity:

1. cosmos – as aesthetic: an assemblage that pleases, an order that is attractive and hospitable to others.
2. cosmos – as cosmology: a place that is larger than the earth but only one of the parts of the boundless universe
3. cosmos – as political philosophy: all humanity to which we all belong, and hence the phrase citizen of the world, cosmopolitan.

Contemporary culture in general and art in particular is increasingly associated with the term cosmopolitanism. Artworks are often translating local and global forms. (1) Artists are seen as exemplars of a new global self. (2) Biennales and festivals are fora for bringing ideas from all over the world into a new critical and interactive framework. (3) These propositions are usually contested in relation to whether they can either fulfill their own proclaimed ideal, or conceal an ideological bias. My concern is not to expose the naivety of artistic idealism, or reveal the real agenda of cosmopolitanism as a cultural camouflage for corporate capitalism. The fit between the theory and practice of cosmopolitanism has a more complex twist than these empirical and conceptual critiques. It starts with the examination of what kind of cosmos is imagined inside the term cosmopolitanism.

Most contemporary critiques of cosmopolitanism are motivated by an attempt to situate it along or against the more conspicuous manifestations of globalization. In the most banal uses of globalization there is very little significance given to key term globe. The world is treated as a flat square surface upon which everything is brought closer together and ruled by a common set of rules. Globalization has an integrative dynamic, but a globe without a complex 'ecology of practices' would not have a world. Cosmopolitanism is thus usually understood as both a descriptive term that refers to both metropolitan situations in which cultural differences are increasingly entangled, and as a normative concept for representing a sense of moral belonging to the world as a whole. More recently, the concept of

cosmopolitanism has been applied to the political networks formed through transnational social movements, and the emergent legal framework that extends political rights beyond exclusivist territorial boundaries. In its most comprehensive mode the concept of cosmopolitanism also assumes a critical inflection whereby it refers to the process of self-transformation that occurs in the encounter with the other (4). Cosmopolitanism thus captures a diverse range of critical discourses that address the shifts in perspectival awareness as a result of the global spheres of communication, the cultural transformation generated by new patterns of mobility, the emergence of transnational social networks and structures, and the processes of self transformation that are precipitated through the encounter with alterity. Across this wide spectrum of interpretations there is no specific condition or singular goal to which the concept of cosmopolitanism can be pinned. It appears more like a concept for representing a process of interaction that is based on the principle of openness and is leading towards the formation of a global public sphere.

Artists and curators have sought to define the horizons of their vision in these broader terms. Biennales such as the recent iteration of the Sydney Biennale (2012) *All Our Relations* and recurring mega exhibitions like *Documenta* in Kassel are prime examples of this attempt to situate art in the widest possible framework. Art is not alone in its attempt to expand its frontiers. It is part of a broader paradigm shift in the conceptualization of culture. The widening of the culture is evident in the way it is now commonly defined as a resource, as a problem solving activity and as a form of instrumental knowledge. Culture is now a key part of the socio-political landscape that is credited with the capacity to initiate urban regeneration and provide social integration in sectors where all other agencies and institutions have failed.

There is little doubt that the biennale as an institution has played a critical role in engaging these local and global processes of cultural exchange. There is not sufficient time to provide a comprehensive genealogy of the biennale forms, but for the purpose of setting the scene let me just outline three trends and identify some influential examples. First, the biennale has from its outset functioned as a survey and display of the process of internationalization in art. Second, it has developed models of engagement with the postcolonial spaces for cultural production. Third, it has been incorporated into the neo-liberal agenda of branding cities as creative hubs.

Since Okwui Enwezor's *Documenta XI* (2002) and the Gwanju (2002) and Istanbul (2005) Biennales co-curated by Hou Hanru and Charles Esche there has been a significant shift in the emphasis given to social interaction and the highlighting of a discursive approach. Hanru described the 2002 Gwanju Biennale as a platform for

initiating new ideas and developing critical social relations. Twenty five independent collectives were invited to create their own areas within the framework of the Biennale, and according to Hou Hanru the platform soon turned into a “pandorra’s box” (5). In 2008, again in the context of the Gwanju Biennale, Ranjiv Hoskote described the attempt to incorporate a wide array of perspectives as transforming the format into “a parliament of global contemporary narratives” (6).

Creating the widest possible framework for art does not necessarily mean that art is shifted out of its domain and relocated in the globalized world of commerce and the transnational spheres of political struggle. Obviously art is situated in a complex network of exchange and inter-dependency, and some artists see their work as contributing to a wider platform of social transformation and political resistance. Hence it is possible, as Carlos Basualdo has argued, that the Biennale does not “completely belong to the system and it can give rise to subversive possibilities” (7). However, it is not my aim to justify the work of art by identifying the extent to which it either fulfils economic criteria or generates radical political discourse. In this essay I will turn to a range of aesthetic categories in order to give voice to the distinct and vital way art can express a sensory awareness of the world. This will involve revisiting some very old fashion and now almost totally ignored categories such as perspective, imagination and creation, as well as interrogating the meaning of cosmos and the function of translation in contemporary cosmopolitan theory.

I will aim to define this mode of articulating a sensory awareness of the world through the concept of aesthetic cosmopolitanism. I will seek to develop this concept in three ways. First by considering a range of examples from the contemporary art world. This will include by focus on specific art works and the curatorial contexts in which they are situated. Second I will examine the discourse on cosmopolitanism. This will require a comparison of both classical and modern theories, as well as artistic and philosophical representations. Third I will attempt to explore the intersections between these practices and theories. As I inter-relate these three elements I will not be suggesting that the deficiencies or distortions produced in one element can be corrected by incorporating aspects from or adopting the viewpoints established in the other.

### *The Widening of Perspective*

Setting art in a broader frame is in part a response to the innovations in pictorial perspective. There have been a number of ways in which artists have adopted an imaginary vantage point for viewing the world, or experimented with the use of

new media to enhance or multiply the experience of perspective. In this brief section I will outline four fundamental innovations in the way art is seen. These are instances in which the way the world is seen has necessitated a shift in the position from which the work is seen and the negotiations that are necessary for the making of a worldview. I will categorise these shifts in perspective under four key terms: aerial, archaeological, ambient and activist.

One of the great innovations that have come from contemporary Aboriginal painting in Australia is the aerial perspective of the land. Most contemporary Aboriginal paintings are produced with the large canvas flat on the ground. The artist, or a collective move around it and the image usually follows from the humming of a song cycle that evokes the interconnectedness of a place, an ancestor figure and a journey. In the case of Doreen Reid Nakamarra we are invited to look down on the paintings that have been carefully installed on the floor. We see the intricate patterning and colouring of the canvas surface from an angle that is partly to the side and telescopically reduced.

This intimation of a wider viewpoint can be compared to the vertical axes proposed in a work by the American First Nations collective Postcommodity. In their installation *Do You Remember When* (2012) the four person collective cut a four-foot hole to expose the land of the Gadigal people that lay below the polished floors of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The hole in the floor of an institution that hosted the 2012 Sydney Biennale thus also served as an archaeological frame for the absent history of the local indigenous people.

The gaze that contemplates a painting still operates as if it is looking through a window. Aboriginal painting alters this viewpoint. New media installations now have the capacity to create an ambient perspective where the virtual window cascades into a near infinity of viewpoints. Unlike the gaze that operates through a fixed window that is always defined in relation to the spectator's grounded placement before the window, the virtual window does not presuppose that the spectator's gaze is bound to any fixed position, but it is implicated within the "infinite infinity" of virtual horizons. In *T\_Visionarium II* (2006) (8) produced by the iCinema group of artists (Centre for Interactive Cinema Research at the University of New South Wales, College of Fine Arts), the spectator is enclosed in a 360-degree cylindrical screen that is composed of 300 'windows' that hover against a black screen. Each window is a screen. The resulting panorama is not one evocative of an encounter with the awesome sublime but rather a field of focused activity. The spectator enters the realm with a remote control device and can select a screen to 'drill' deeper into the archive that is contained in each window. The characteristic feature of a contemporary work of ambient art is that an emergent image never appears in the same work twice. The exact view, or point of revelation

cannot be found twice, therefore it can never be verified. It is always a relational view. It is shaped by its own iterative dynamics of self-formation, and the feedback from the specific points of entry and modes of participation of the viewer. No viewer ever completes this kind of work, but no two viewers have exactly the same experience. In general, the ambient perspective appears more in the form of assemblage where the viewpoint is as much formed by the complex cluttering together of bits as it is by the spaces left between these bits and pieces.

Finally we have the example of artists that are either part of collectives or align their practice with specific groups in order to deepen and widen their engagement with social and political practices in everyday life. In *Documenta XIII* there were a number of examples such as Maria Theresa Alves and Mark Dion whose installations were the consequence of particular projects concerning the threats to planetary ecology. In their art practice there is an acknowledgement that such issues are of a scale that they exceed the capacity of any individual or even a collective, therefore what they provide is the traceline of an invariably incomplete but much bigger picture. The activist perspective is not developed in opposition, but as an extension of what art is and what sort of worldview it constructs. Numerous examples can be drawn from collectives such as No-one is Illegal. In the 2008 Taipei Biennale there was a strong representation of such activist perspectives, most notably in the work by The International Errorists and the sub-section curated by Oliver Ressler.

### *Defining Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism*

It is now a commonplace in the philosophical discourse on cosmopolitanism to cite the phrase “citizen of the world” that was first used by Socrates and then popularised by Diogenes the Cynic. The Stoics led by Zeno were the first to incorporate this category into all dimensions of their philosophy. It is also worth noting that the Stoics claimed that the sensory faculty of aesthesis underpinned the philosophical categories of reason, ethics and physics. Modern philosophers have freely acknowledged these sources as foundation points for their own conception of cosmopolitanism. A constant in the philosophical discourse on cosmopolitanism is that all human beings could belong to a single community. This conception of community is open to all regardless of race, class, sex or location. In broad terms, there is a consensus that cosmopolitanism refers to ideal of belonging to a single community. The only variation on cosmopolitanism arises from the identification of the prevailing category that will shape this future community.

Thus the norms of modern and contemporary cosmopolitanism are variously shaped by the interplay or dominance of moral, political, economic and cultural

concepts. For instance, Martha Nussbaum (9), one of the strongest contemporary adherents to Stoic philosophy, has fastened onto the idea that the cosmopolitan community should be based on the moral conditions for defining universal human rights. Jürgen Habermas (10) takes a more sociological perspective and argues that such rights cannot take root unless they are embedded in social and political institutions that operate within a transnational sphere of authority and legitimacy. Promoters of the free markets such as Milton Friedman (11) have long held the view that the liberation from national trading restrictions would secure a global economic equality. Whereas Anthony Appiah (12) has argued that a global community can only emerge through the emergence of framework that respects local differences but also promotes the sharing of common cultural values.

To develop a unique perspective for cosmopolitanism requires more than liberating it from the territorial and institutional constraints of nation studies. There are many perspectives that transcend national boundaries. The prevailing approaches towards cosmopolitanism recognize the need to go beyond the nation-centric vision of society, but they also invariably embed the cosmopolitan within another pre-existing perspective. Hence, the contemporary accounts of cosmopolitanism are now articulated within four perspectives. (13) The philosophical perspective stresses the formation of cosmopolitan moral values. The sociological perspective identifies the emergence of cosmopolitan contexts in everyday life. The political perspective highlights the role of cosmopolitan institutions and modes of governance. The psycho-social perspective places emphasis on the agency, disposition and orientation of cosmopolitan individuals.

A genuine “methodological cosmopolitanism” would not seek to identify its object through the mediating influence of other perspectives. It would require the articulation of its own worldview through its own perspective on the world. A cosmopolitan worldview is too easily reduced to the elements that are stressed by these pre-existing categories, such as tolerance, solidarity, openness to strangers, abidance to international law and a curious regard for others and difference. Is a cosmopolitan perspective confined to these elements and qualities? If so, then it is embedded in and a product of the philosophical, sociological, political and psycho-social perspective. It would also reduce the idea of a cosmopolitan worldview to being a consequence of external forces, and deflect our understanding of not only what motivates it, but how and why it is formed through thought and imagination.

*Kant and the Modern Cosmos*

The central text that inspires almost all modern and contemporary accounts of cosmopolitanism is one by Immanuel Kant. At the beginning of his career he wrote a rather wild and speculative essay on cosmology. He was quick to disown this text as he realized that it was a rather simplistic effort to extrapolate philosophical ruminations from the basis of recent scientific claims. Extrapolation is no way to do philosophy he would argue and doing it on top of rather faulty and fanciful scientific claims was even more disastrous. However, his essay in defense of cosmopolitanism was written at the end of his long career. It was a sober and cautious argument that drew on his careful elaboration of the limitations of human nature and historical development of political structures. He believed that despite our intrinsic warring tendencies society was advancing to a point where states would find it in their interest to develop common legal and political frameworks that simultaneously protected their individual freedoms and cultural identities, while also enabling them to trade and travel freely. His vision of cosmopolitanism relied primarily on a growing rational consensus over the modes of governance. Kant's theory of cosmopolitanism did not contain even the most remote hint of his early cosmological forays as it stressed the rational foundations for the co-existence of the different peoples of the world.

This foundational text has seemed to serve scholars in the humanities and the social sciences rather well. It is not just that everyone refers to it, but that it has marked out the conceptual parameters that everyone still seems to operate within. As Etienne Balibar noted in relation to the supposedly incommensurable differences between the cosmopolitan perspectives articulated by Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas, they are all too Kantian! (14) The one field in which Kant's thinking on cosmopolitanism generates some resistance is within the visual arts. I will argue that some artists are uncomfortable with the idea that we can have a rational framework for global co-existence that is divested of any cosmological vision. This niggling discomfort starts from the point I raised at the outset: what sort of 'cosmos' do you imagine in your cosmopolitanism?

Despite the difference in identifying the specific perspectives, values, structures, conditions or frameworks that will enable a cosmopolitan order, all of these thinkers believe that humanity can operate within a single community. What is also common in this philosophical and political discourse on cosmopolitanism is the inspirational declaration of a huge NO in ancient Greece. Socrates, Diogenes and Zeno all said NO to the polis as the limit points of their belonging. They rejected the idea that the community was restricted to the place one was accidentally born in, or even the city to which one had chosen to move. They refused to confine their ultimate sense of allegiance to any single city, no matter



how much it was venerated. Athens was not perfect but Socrates refused to leave from it. Diogenes took refuge in it. While Zeno maintained a sentimental attachment to Citium he also never returned home. For them this city was an 'education' to all other cities, but the real home was the 'cosmos'. While the stimulating force of this refusal is clear, both the meaning of cosmos and the affirmative dimensions of this declaration have been obscured by the ensuing philosophical discourse.

Almost no one has paused to consider the adequacy of the term "world" for the ancient Greek term "cosmos". It is commonplace to assume that cosmos refers to the world. However, in Greek the term was, and still is, much more layered and multi-faceted. Cosmos was not *geia*—the earth. It could not be reduced to a terrestrial domain, but referred to everything both earthly and heavenly. Cosmos is both a terrestrial and a celestial term. However, cosmos also referred to a notion of the people and a mode of ornamentation that imbued things with order and grace. Thus when Socrates claimed a sense of belonging with the cosmos, he was defining his political and spiritual membership to a community of 'wise' people. For Socrates, the singular sign of wisdom was to live in harmony with the cosmos. This is a sense of community not bounded by territorial or racial markers. It is open to all irrespective of who they are, or where they are from. In fact, the only requirement for membership is the capacity to live in harmony with the laws of the cosmos. The law of the cosmos was a subject of constant interpretation in Greek philosophy. The Stoics had a radical and dynamic understanding of cosmic reason. They saw it as a creative, capricious and unpredictable force. They had many names for it such as "artistic fire".

In the modern uses of cosmopolitanism it used as a description of an ideal state of being in the world or as a model form of governance. In political and ethic terms it marks a normative ideal that we should all aspire towards. My perspective will reverse the function of the term. It will not signify an ideal end toward which we should head, but refer to the fundamental ways we make sense of the world and construct our modes of relating to others. In that sense aesthetic-ethico mode of cosmopolitanism is more about the cosmos as a space of companionship, a place, a practice and a people all at once!

This wider conception and affirmative embrace of the cosmos is nowhere to be found in modern and contemporary discourses on cosmopolitanism. While it disappeared in the process of separating philosophy from religion, it seems to have survived in the sensibilities of art. William Blake claimed to see the world through a grain of sand. Blake is not alone in this trans-historical vision of the scope of imagination. Consider this quotation from the Russian avant garde artist Malevich in which he elevates the function of machines to the role of being a NEW context

that would crack open an ANCIENT secret that had perdured in art but almost vanished from popular consciousness. Malevich says:

“The new life of iron and the machine, the roar of automobiles, the glitter of electric lights, the whirring of propellers, have awoken the *soul*, which was stifling in the catacombs of ancient reason and has emerged on the roads woven between *sky and earth*. If all artists could see the crossroads of these *celestial* paths; if they could comprehend these monstrous runways and the weavings of our bodies with the clouds in the sky, then they would not paint chrysanthemums.” (15)

Malevich stresses that the function of art was not to mimic nature but to compete with it—that is, the artist must create something new, and in this transformative act, the artist would not only awaken the reasoning mind but more importantly the soul. Once the artist is in this new state, then where would it lead him? Malevich suggests that the scope of this vision takes the artist to the cross-roads of sky and earth. This celestial pathway is a harmonic destiny. Modernism, in Malevich’s word aimed for the exact same focal point and horizon of classical and Hellenistic philosophy. What Malevich’s quotation reminds us of is that cosmology and truth seeking reason, while they are routinely separated in Western philosophy, are not so easily divorced. Philosophers may have cut themselves free from the questions of the soul, and theologians were cut away from the role of authority in political governance, however for Malevich the spirit of the cosmos is still visible to all in a simple black cube.

This curious transposition of the eternal into the contemporary returns us to the quest for universals. However, the Russian philosopher and art critic Boris Groys argues that the example of Malevich offers a vision that is different to classical philosophy and he thereby categorizes it as “weak universalism”. It is weak in the sense that the artwork’s transcendence across borders that divide eras is made possible because its content has been divested of substantive elements. The capacity to produce universal meaning is not based on its mediation of either divine forms or content that has unequivocal legibility. Groys argues that Malevich’s work becomes universal through the reduction of signs to an absolute minimum. A black cube can be meaningful to anyone precisely because its message is also a weak one. (16)

More recently, the photographer Wolfgang Tillmans (17) has pondered over the reception of light in the night sky of a star that has long since faded at its point of origin as a metaphor for the limits of our own conception of enlightenment and the potential existence of parallel states within the cosmos. Rosmary Trockel (18) has adopted one of the classical meanings of cosmos to highlight the common endeavour of ordering a world that is drawn from the personal imaginary. Cosmos

becomes a heading for organizing the always expanding universe of objects in everyday life. It refers to the knowledge that is generated in the process of arranging things and images. Numerous other examples also come to mind such as Yayoi Kusama's *Soul Under the Moon* (2002) and James Turrell's installation *Within Without* (2010) at the National Gallery of Australia.

It is my contention that the principle of creativity is intricately interwoven with the affirmative ideas of cosmos, and that a cosmopolitan imaginary is a constitutive feature of artistic sensibility. How could I ever prove this?

Let us start with this primary capacity for seeing, sensing and imagining the world. When we look out at the world there is the horizon. The land bends away because it is part of a sphere and the skies open like a boundless screen. At no stage is anything like the whole ever visible. One part of the surface of the world hides another, and at any point the vast bulk is always beyond our range of vision. The world as a whole is always hidden from any direct view. Our eyes always look up as much as they look out and across. Looking up we gain a vertical view—the cone of vision extends to the infinite depth of the cosmic screen. This gaze exposes us to far more than we can comprehend. This luminous darkness and sparkling murkiness inspires both dreadful awe and uplifting wonder.

I have written at length about aesthetic cosmopolitanism as a category that addresses some of the global orientations within contemporary art (19). I have also suggested that the term spherical thinking can refer to the modality that engages with the ethical challenges of living with difference, and promotes a view on cross-cultural understanding that is based on the willingness to receive and move towards differences from beyond your immediate horizons. However, my purpose for this essay is not to utilise this term as a category for capturing the visual culture of globality, the manifestation of hybrid subjectivities, the proliferation of cross-cultural encounters, or even the extent to which the topos of art has been de-nationalized. The emphasis is not directed towards the emergence of a cosmopolitan mentality and its attending normative dictates, or even whether contemporary art is harbinger of novel forms of global mobility and cross-cultural conduct. Nor, will I be examining the formation of cosmopolitan networks or systems for representing a new kind of cosmopolitan knowledge and information exchange. My focus on aesthetic cosmopolitanism starts with the question of the existence of a fundamental link between the act of imagination and the experience of companionship with the cosmos. Does such a link exist, and if so, to what extent do they shape each other?

*Normative Cosmopolitanism*

It is clear that in Kant's cosmopolitan theory imagination is a key driver that enables the subject to exit the particularistic view of the world. If imagination pushes us beyond the boundaries of "self incurred tutelage", but understanding is only found when you have used "resolution and courage" to approach the universal, then what happens to the status of the aesthetic? It is the starting point, but then it must be harnessed to produce understanding. It is this hierarchical transition from impression to cognition that has also generated untold suspicion and resentment between the artist and the philosopher. However, apart from this separation in status, there is also a fundamental difference in the approach towards handling the sensory and conceptual domains. This is not a matter of difference of opinion or conflict over ideological and moral outlooks, but a distinction over the status of the image. Alliances that share absolute political and ethical solidarity can irreversibly sunder over the status that is attributed towards images. Artists would banish philosophers from their cosmos just as vigorously as Plato sought to exile them from his Republic.

This schematic distinction between artists and philosophers obviously borders on a caricature. However, my aim is to use these figures to flesh out the difference between normative and aesthetic cosmopolitanism. Kant's philosophy is the exemplification of the normative cosmopolitan. He begins his move towards a cosmopolitan consciousness with the observation that his primary view of the world is framed within a bounded territory. This view of the world follows from an original attachment to place. For Kant this attachment is also the first problem or obstacle that he must overcome. He must exit from the narrow limits of the particular. The imagination spurs him towards an elsewhere. However, it is by working on these images of a wider horizon that he proposes that it is possible to understand the wider connections to other and develop a universal sense of belonging. The work that is done for understanding is not the further creation of images. However, it is through the rational process of understanding that Kant suggests that he can de-territorialize subjective attachment and establish bonds that link him to the world as a whole.

We know the imagination is the faculty that produces images. It does not merely retrieve images. This may sound tautological but as Bachelard reminds us, this definition of the nature of imagination has the benefit of distinguishing it from memory. (20) While the function of imagination is to produce new images and not simply recall the images from the past, nevertheless the relationship to time is complicated by the way images lean forward and backward in time as they draw from aspects of memory and anticipate or at least attempt to foresee alternate realities.

Is there any view of the world that stimulates the faculty of imagination? The elements of 'a view' are composed of the combination of the vertical and the horizontal. In the interplay between the horizontal and the vertical gaze there is a limit point and the sense of the infinite. Perhaps imagination begins with the stimulation produced by the need to conjure an image for what lies beyond and a meaning of all that stands within the massive field of view. I imagine in order to comprehend what I cannot see but which I sense is all around. Aesthesis starts with this kind of sensory awareness of the world. Rancière informs us that this fundamental sensory awareness becomes disciplined within three kinds of regimes. The gaze is universal but the way sensation is organised into meaning depends on a system of interpretation. The belief that the meaning and beauty of the cosmos can be found in ordinary objects, is he argues, a product of the modern period that produced what he calls an "aesthetic regime". This aesthetic regime is a cosmopolitan worldview. Hence, in Rancière, although he never directly uses the term cosmopolitan, we find a fundamental link between aesthetic imagination and art as a world making activity. This helps to focus the axiom that art is a world making activity, as it directs our attention to the specific ways in which sensory imaginings of the world are organized into a specific worldview.

For an artist such as John Berger neither the status of the starting point nor the order of progress seems right. The topology of artistic consciousness can be distinguished by pushing back the sense of worldliness to the primal experiences of the womb. There is considerable fascination with such ontic spheres in *Documenta XIII* and the trilogy by Peter Sloterdijk. However, I will start with a paradoxical proposition: the particularistic sense of place is already a universal experience of space. Hence, the starting point from which one views the world is not a problem from which to escape, but is the ground of which a microcosm is formed. Berger stated that "every convincing painting makes a spatial system of its own". (21) In his numerous essays on photography he also commented upon their shift from a private to public meaning. The stranger's capacity to relate to an image is not confined to identifying the context and topography that is represented in the image, but rather comes from a more ambiguous process of discerning a feeling of spatial companionship. The place becomes activated for a stranger when they start to feel that they too have been in a place like that. This place is not deduced by any formal set of perspectival rules, nor is it locatable through the content of a cultural code. Berger suggests that place is both imperceptible and the ambient organizing point from which the painting's energy commences.

"The painter is continually trying to discover, to stumble upon, the place which will contain and surround his present act of painting. Ideally there should be as many places as there are paintings. The trouble is that a painting often fails to become a place. [...] When a place is found it is found somewhere on the frontier between

nature and art. It is like a hollow in the sand within which the frontier has been wiped out. The place of the painting begins in this hollow. Begins with a practice, with something being done by the hands, and the hands then seeking approval of the eye, until the whole body is involved in the hollow.” (22)

Berger acknowledges that this revelation of place is rare. When it is achieved it has the effect of doubling back on the subject that disappeared in order to enable the image to form. When Berger tries to outline the “outcome” of a story he produces an equally meandering assessment of the storyteller’s unique sense of direction and the topography constituted in the story. He stresses that the key is not just in the specific details that captivate a storyteller’s attention but also in the rhythm of this mode of pondering and lingering. He then compares this form of narrative movement to a dancer and suggests that we should read into each step the expectations and memories of a lived life.

“Throughout the story we become accustomed to the storyteller’s particular procedure of bestowing attention, and of then making a certain sense of what was at first glance chaotic. We begin to acquire his storytelling habits. [...] We will then apply it to the chaos of ongoing life, in which multitude of stories are hidden. [...] Every storyteller has or his own procedure. No two are alike.” (23)

The function of place is “to welcome the absent”. (24) By doubling back it also leaps up as the generative and life affirming force of creation as it produces “a part [...] of what begins again and again.” (25) Place therefore serves an ordering activity. However, the purpose of this ordering is not the establishment of a segmented hierarchy but an assembly that intimates cosmic unity. Note carefully how Berger’s conclusion to an essay on Degas finds a harmonic union between the particular and the universal and then brings it back to the absolute recognition that a mother has for her child: “Watching the woman standing on one leg and drying her foot, we are happy for what has been recognized and admitted. We feel the existent recalling its own Creation, before there was any fatigue [...] Do we not all dream of being known, known by our backs, legs, buttocks, shoulders, elbows, hairs? [...] just nakedly known. Known as a child is by its mother.” (26) This is the same point that Berger also made two decades earlier when he described August Sander’s photographic method as “translucently documentary”. Berger zoomed into Sander’s portrayal of the universal in the detail of the ordinary by reiterating Walter Benjamin’s appraisal: “It was indeed unprejudiced observation, bold and at the same time delicate, very much in the spirit of Goethe’s remark; ‘There is a delicate mode of the empirical which identifies itself so intimately with its object that it thereby becomes theory.’” (27) These cosmological connections between the “silent eternity” and the “space of the world” are now the subject of considerable theoretical scrutiny. Rancière has observed that the very formation of what he calls

the aesthetic regime, which he claims was exemplified by Flaubert and Mallarmé, is the point at which in aesthetic terms “anything at all can be beautiful, on condition that it gives rise to the presence of the infinite, that is, of its own nothingness.” (28)

How close is this companionship between the empirical and the theoretical? Does one merge into the other? Does the host receive the guest by emptying out herself and then recover identity by catching an image that speaks of their fleeting union? And what do we make of the claim that the site where all this happens, the studio, also exudes a sense of well-being? Is this the satisfaction of good craftsmanship, or does this simple pleasure also speak to a deeper eros—the union with the ineffable and the eternal? All these questions rest on a worldview that is as celestial as it is terrestrial, and on a conception of the role of the artist as interrogator of the enigma of existence. For Berger, heaven is imagined as “invisible, unenterable but intimately close”. (29) This image of heaven is not an other world, but an ambient sphere that is as infinite as the cosmic horizon and as ubiquitous as a “pebble or a salt-cellar on the table”. Here again we find an affinity with Gaston Bachelard’s reflection on the cosmos, not as external phenomenon or an object that requires contemplation, but an impression of immensity that already exists within ourselves. (30) It also accords with Peter Sloterdijk’s neat summation of the metaphysical definition of the cosmos as “a totality of warmth and meaning, as the largest possible unity of the ensouled, as a concentrically built whole with a marked domestic character, or as an ideal first abode for intelligent beings.” (31)

Following the big bang of Creation, arises what Greek philosophers called *anangki*—the struggle of living with necessity. These ancient terms—cosmos, creation, truth, place, necessity—still speak to fundamental and inescapable questions that haunt modernity. The fact that they are not part of the conventional discourse on art does not make Berger bawl, nor does he believe that artists have deflected their gaze away from the fundamental challenges that are encapsulated by these ancient terms. My point in teasing out a cosmological perspective in Berger’s writing is not to reinstate the old metaphysics and to elevate artists as mediators between this world and the divine cosmos.

The artist is constantly re-territorializing the primal experience of wonder in a de-territorialized world. In the artistic consciousness the cosmopolitan imaginary is not achieved via successive steps from impression to understanding. On the contrary, it erupts in the simultaneity of a big-bang aesthetic moment. The artist is here—he notices the bend in the horizon—she looks up towards the sky—she wonders what is this and what else could there be? The impulse is not how do I get out, but rather how do I make sense of this totality, and what is on the other side of that which is visible?

While the steps of normative cosmopolitanism proceed in a regular manner, the work of aesthetic cosmopolitanism is more like a leap from the void. The difference can be put another, the philosopher seeks understanding of the connections and meanings in things, the artist creates images to connect and give new meaning to things. Creation involves making something appear that was previously invisible. There is much romantic and mystical obfuscation that surrounds the idea of creation. While the history of our socialization points to it as an exceptional phenomenon, my point is to stress that creation is an inherently human activity. However, I would also argue that creation should not be conflated with translation. Of course, there is creativity in the act of translating, but we should not assume that creation is an extension of the task of transferring meaning from one context to another, or reconfiguring the meaning within existing elements. It produces images that come out of history but they are not bound by or the sum of specific historical forces. Imagination has a double perspective towards the images in its own historical context, it simultaneously reassembles elements that exist in a given period and it also reproduces them anew. This production of novelty is the point at which the chain of causality is broken and it is the gap through which surprise, wonder and freedom enters.

Many philosophers have wrestled with this strange historical modality. Perhaps the most eloquent expression of the way the past manifests itself in aesthetic imagination is found in Bachelard's phrasing of the flow of the distant past as "resounding with echoes", and its re-appearance being caused by its "brilliance" (32). The transmission of the past he argues is secured by an ongoing radiance that appears to survive after the relevance of its content has faded. So this delightful prospect raises the question of how a critic can either catch the glow or be in the flow? The instruction is very simple: adopt the same supple poise of openness that is evident in the artist's receptive position. Picking up these signals does not require the handling of a finely tuned instrument, or depend on the maneuvering of a pre-determined category, but rather it emanates from a state of mind that is available to the "very ecstasy of the newness of the image." For Bachelard this process of reception and transmission can happen because he believes that the work of aesthetic creation can move from one soul to another. (33)

Roland Barthes also pondered over the mystery of artistic communication. He noted that literature could convey a level of meaning that exceeds the information that is provided in the text. He distinguished between what he called the obvious meaning that can be determined in a systematic manner, and the obtuse meaning that is "blunted, rounded in form" and eludes any of the manifest structures that are utilized in the text. (34) To grasp the sense of the obtuse meaning that emanates from the text he suggested that the critics must participate in the game



of creation. In short, the critic must share the approach taken by the artist. This encounter makes them companions to the unforeseeable.

I would uphold the rather traditional definition of creation as the process of transforming matter into form. My concern is not to identify whether imagination is either embedded within a social context, or the product of trans-historical forces. I am fascinated by a rather simple proposition that the work of the imagination is linked to the perceptual experience of the cosmos. I would like to test the idea that imagination begins at the point of looking out to the horizon and up into the vortex of the sky. Imagination is therefore not just a means towards the development of understanding, and neither is the primary place of belonging a point from which one must exit in order to move towards the universal. Imagination is the faculty that kicks us into the experience of the world and images are the material for making a world.

Berger argues that art produces a truth that the representatives of the dominant order would either prefer to ignore, or fail to register. The status of the truth claim in the aesthetic imagination is not equivalent to conventional legal definitions and it often exceeds the rational and empirical modes of verification. This ambiguity follows from the complex relationship between the image and its history, and the fact that it arises from the sensory faculties rather than through the procedural steps of reasoned thought. Hence, the axiom that the image comes before thought. This is not to be taken as an excuse to liberate the image from the scrutiny of critical thinking, but rather an acknowledgement that it occurs prior to, and is to an extent independent of the confirmatory and validating frameworks of rationality. Hence, the relationship between image and truth is not confined to a revelatory process by which the image presents a pre-existent truth, but rather it serves to produce a re-alignment between the actual sensory awareness of the world and the available forms for understanding. The tension between the actual and the available is a constitutive force in the production of the image. New images come into the world because the available ways of seeing fail to give form to the actual world. This invokes the fundamental point that recurs in all of Berger's reflexive statements: critical writing in particular, and creative work in general, both require getting close to things so that something can start. The organizing principle of creativity requires both intimacy and a cosmic sweep. Berger concludes these observations on the double movement of creation through the words of the Chinese painter Shitao: "the brush is for saving things from chaos". (35) Bachelard turned to the artist's attunement to the sensory faculties in order to invigorate phenomenology. Rancière highlights the artistic practices as a form of distribution of the sensible because it is also the pathway to the experience of equality and freedom. Berger also returns to the process of creation to expand

consciousness of the intimate but also immense connection between aesthetic perception and cosmic harmony.

These explorations of the cosmos are not other-worldly. They do not set it up as an external object that demands contemplation. It brings us to the point of thinking about art as a trace of the freedom to avoid repeating yourself. Each image is a gesture of how we can free ourselves from our own patterns of association. We return to the work of the imagination and creation to re-think how we can see the cosmos anew.

### *Translation and the Cosmos*

The concept of a cosmopolitan contemporary in the artworld clearly deserves a thorough institutional critique. However, my point at this stage is to focus on how one is expected to get there, and then consider whether such an institutional form will, by definition mean that it has generated another restricted vision of the cosmos. Do artists and curators get there when they de-particularize their original cultural perspectives and engage with the emergent but tangible discourse of contemporaneity? Is this it? Is this the full extent of a cosmopolitan imaginary? Is this NO all that is now required in order to be a citizen of the cosmos? What kind of cosmos in cosmopolitanism are we now willing to affirm and embody with a big YES?

I ask these questions in order to remind myself of the distinction I commenced with in relation to normative and aesthetic cosmopolitanism, and to consider whether the promotion of a cosmopolitan agenda within the contemporary artworld may well draw on the similar logic, and remain trapped within the same 'narrow' parameters of the philosopher's vision or normative cosmopolitanism. The debates on cosmopolitanism have been dominated by political accounts of the complicities in cultural standardization. I do not want to be ensnared in the claims that all mega-exhibitions or Biennales are inevitably determined by commercial priorities and their function can be reduced to service providers for economic globalization. Such events are often caught on two poles: one that exhibits the art *from* the world, and the other that engages artists to make exhibitions *of* the world. My concern is to reflect on the extent to which aesthetic cosmopolitanism can be differentiated from normative cosmopolitanism. In the contemporary uses of cosmopolitanism the circle between the philosophical discourse on normative categories and the aesthetic categories tightens into a noose that squeezes the perceptual order of the sensory faculties into a pre-determined space. The aesthetic category does not stand apart from but becomes subsumed in the

normative framework. This suggests that the aesthetic vision of cosmopolitanism is yet to find a place in contemporary discourse.

### *Final score*

- (1) See: Nicolas Bourriaud: *The Radicant*. transl. J. Gussen/L. Porten, New York 2009.
- (2) See: Marsha Meskimmon: *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination*. London 2011.
- (3) See: Nikos Papastergiadis/Meredith Martin: "Art Biennales and Cities as Platforms for Global Dialogue". In: Liana Giorgi/Monica Sassatelli/Gerard Delanty: *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*. London 2011.
- (4) See: Gerard Delanty: *The Cosmopolitan Imagination*. Cambridge 2009.
- (5) Hou Hanru: "An Event City, A Pandora's Box". In: Charles Esche/Hou Hanru/Sung Wan-kyun (eds.): *Pause*, Gwanju 2002, p. 31.
- (6) Ranjit Hoskote: "Biennial Format. To Biennial or Not to Biennial?". Bergen Biennial Conference, Bergen 17-20 September 2009.
- (7) Carlos Basualdo, "The Unstable Institution". In: Paula Marincola (ed.): *Questions of Practice: What Makes a Great Exhibition?*. Philadelphia, p. 50.
- (8) iCinema: *T\_Visionarium II*, st 'Scientia': University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2006. For Bib Purposes: Project Directors: Neil Brown, Dennis Del Favero, Matthew McGinity, Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel. Produced by iCinema Centre and co-produced by ZKM, Karlsruhe.
- (9) See: Martha Nussbaum: *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*. Boston 1996.
- (10) See: Jürgen Habermas: "Kant's Idea of Perpetual Peace, with the Benefit of Two Hundred Years' Hindsight". In: J. Bohman & M. Lutz-Bachmann Cambridge Mass. (ed.): *Perpetual Peace: Essays on Kant's Cosmopolitan Edeal*. MIT Press 1997, pp. 113-53.
- (11) See: Milton Friedman: *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago 1962, Chicago University Press.
- (12) Kwame Anthony Appiah: *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York 2006.
- (13) See: Steven Vertovec/Robin Cohen (eds): *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism*. Oxford 2002.
- (14) Étienne Balibar: "On Universalism". In: *Debate with Alain Badiou*. eipcp, 02.2007
- (15) Kazimir Malevich: "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting [1913]". In: Harrison & Wood (eds.): *Art in Theory 1900-2000*. Oxford 2003, p. 177.

- (16) Boris Groys: *Going Public*. New York 2010, p. 110
- (17) See: Wolfgang Tillmans: *Wolfgang Tillmans*. ex. cat., Serpentine Gallery, London 2010.
- (18) See: Rosemarie Trockel: *A Cosmos*. ex. cat., curator: Lynne Cook, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid 2012.
- (19) Nikos Papastergiadis: *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*. Cambridge 2012.
- (20) Gaston Bachelard: *The Poetics of Space*. Boston 1969, p. XXX.
- (21) John Berger: *About Looking*. New York 1980, p. 80.
- (22) John Berger: *The Shape of a Pocket*. London 2001, p. 28-29.
- (23) John Berger: *Bento's Sketchbook*. London 2011, p. 72.
- (24) Berger 2001, p. 32.
- (25) Berger 2001, p. 32.
- (26) Berger 2001, p. 68.
- (27) Berger 1980, p. 28.
- (28) Jacques Rancière: *Mallarme*. trans. S. Corcoran, London 2011, p. 19.
- (29) Berger 2001, p. 11.
- (30) Bachelard 1969, p. 198.
- (31) Peter Sloterdijk/Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs: *Neither Sun Nor Death*. Los Angeles 2011, p. 213.
- (32) Bachelard 1969, p. XXI.
- (33) Bachelard 1969, p. XI.
- (34) Roland Barthes: *Image, Music, Text*. Glasgow 1987, p. 54.
- (35) Berger 2001, p. 16.

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