BOOK REVIEW: Renate Dohmen, Encounters Beyond the Gallery: Relational Aesthetics and Cultural Difference

Fabulous, Fabulation: Intermezzo as Global Thought

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*Fabulous*: late Middle English (in the sense ‘known through fable’) – from French *fabuleux* or Latin *fabulosus* ‘celebrated in fable’, from *fabula*

For celebrants of the writer Junot Díaz, the decolonial imagination questions deterritorialisation and the potential for quiet revolution in writing. Imagination as interface between the subaltern and the decolonial now.¹ Years ago, Arjun Appadurai sought to socialise the ‘global’ agency of the imagination.² Gayatri Spivak and Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay speculate on the power of fabulation, radical or otherwise.³ Can fabulation do the work of imagination?

Renate Dohmen’s imaginative, thought-provoking study Encounters Beyond the Gallery toys with the voice of the critic. Dohmen’s methodology is fantastically impressive due to its turn towards the transversal (Deleuze), the ‘elasticity’ of a more nomadic relational aesthetics, and the quasi ‘shamanistic’ voice of the fictional art critic/doppelganger/female ‘shaman’ Rikki T. Her

¹ See Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination, Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, Jose David Saldivar, eds, Duke
approach is a prescient if eccentric intervention qua art history, anthropology and global studies. It can even be said to be a ‘prophetic’ interjection in the increasingly jaded circuit of biennale reviews and literature on contemporary art. This is because of her distribution of characters – including James Clifford, Garden Gnome, Brown Stagemaker, the Piro Indian Sangama, Amélie, Tamil women designers, Gilles Deleuze, Nicolas Bourriaud, and the fictional artist/critic Rikki T – who make for an amorphous, visionary bricolage. Previously, Bourriaud’s ideas on the Radicant, apropos the nomadic image, have been brought to task by Eric Alliez and Claire Bishop amongst others. Whilst Bishop’s essay on antagonistic aesthetics need not be reiterated here, she seemingly has little concern with what transpires beyond the spatiality of the elite art circuit. Dohmen, by contrast, renders alter conditions of /for ‘The Global Contemporary’. Does this have its limits? Does it pertain to a radical ‘Horizontalization’? What might be space for decolonial fabulation? And this is not all. The author, with élan, gleans anthropological practices preoccupied with self-reflexivity. The ethical, perhaps ontological, dilemma of writing about alterity is nicely summarised by her turn to Lévi-Strauss’s Tristes Tropiques:

They were as close to me as a reflection in a mirror; I could touch them, but I could not understand them. I had been given, at one and the same time, my reward and my punishment […] I had only to succeed in guessing what they were like for them to be deprived of their strangeness […] Or if they were deprived of their strangeness, I could make no use of it, since I was incapable of even grasping what it consisted of.5

In much current anthropological thought on writing, Lévi-Strauss is ‘taboo’ – maybe due to his troubled poetic gestures towards the coeval and its resonance for mimesis and alterity. Mimesis and alterity, of course, bring the musings of Michael Taussig to bear.6 Both Dohmen and Taussig search the magical, the shamanistic, across (obsolete) technologies and spaces cast off from modernity. As is well known, Taussig’s is a commitment to those ‘at the threshold’ of a vicious/capricious globalising economy. The threshold nevertheless possesses a certain vernacularity whose ‘perspectivism’ on capitalism offers imprisonment. The shamanistic is often not perceptible. Regarding the semi-prolitterianised peasants of Colombia or tin miners in Bolivia, iconoclastic economy is possible. To battle with sugar cane or tin, then, is to make a contract with the devil. Such income from hard labour can only be spent on capitalist goods. As such, ‘the politics of

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5 Claude Lévi-Strauss, quoted in ibid, p 34, footnote 86
6 See Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses, Routledge, New York, 1993
epistemic murk and the fiction of the real’ nonetheless privileges the role of myth and magic in (de)colonial violence as much as its healing – ‘in the way in that healing can mobilize terror in order to subvert it through the tripping up of power in its own disorderliness’.7 The healing power of wildness ‘challenges the unity of the symbol, the transcendent totalization binding the image to that which it represents [...] Wildness is the death space of signification.’8 Such signification takes place through the mimetic vertigo of Cuna inculcation of western symbols/products, whether The Talking Dog or a bottle of Jack. More recently, Taussig has supplemented his quasi-surrealist ethnographic practice with his drawings.9 The question, then, becomes how to be ludic in the decolonial ‘aesthetic’ now. What might be the ethnopoetics of shamanism?10

Whilst for Taussig it is the allegory of the museum and labour (the parallels between the Museo del Oro in the national Bank of Bogotá and the exploitation of cocaine workers slaving in the miasma of the mangroves), for Dohmen it is the ‘magical’ relationship between a Deleuzian take on cinema and shamanistic visions in Peru. Unlike Taussig, whose concern is with an explicit critique of global capitalism, Encounters Beyond the Gallery takes as its focus an expanded, a ‘sub-molecular’ sense of relational aesthetics. Relational aesthetics as sensation maybe; relational aesthetics as a form of becoming perhaps. As such, Dohmen’s project engages with important critiques of Bourriaud’s ‘The Radicant’, antagonistic aesthetics and the oscillation of aesthetics/ethics of participation.11 If we evacuate the gallery, what does it mean to be beyond it? Dohmen’s well-informed opening account on global art history and historiography offers a lucid, intuitive study of art in limbo. Here as elsewhere in Encounters Beyond the Gallery, Dohmen has the tremendous capacity to weave the disparate – nicely signalled by the book’s cover: a well-travelled, somewhat busted and rusted boîte. Far from Duchamp’s miniature peripatetic museum, carried as exile, here the suitcase transports us away from the champagne quaffing, global art historian/critic in favour of the quietude of artist Rikki T, to be drawn into her world. In the spirit of

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8 Ibid, p 219
9 See Michael Taussig, I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011
fabulation, Rikki T is Interval. Intentional or not, this Deleuzian cinematic device (cf. Vertov) enables Dohmen to sense worlds strewn. Sown between the ‘relational/post-spectacular’ practice of mega artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, Tamil women in southern India, and the Shipibo-Conibo people of eastern Peru, her narrative is that of four FACTIONS which introduce us to multiple plays of anthropological/art critical positionality. Rejecting methodologies explicitly concerned with the sub-un-conscious, Rikki/Dohmen journey with the atomic. Or what might be termed the vibrancy of matter. The vibrancy of matter has been much discussed in recent years in the light of the scholarship of Jane Bennett. For Bennett, matter somehow remains tied to the materiality of the thing, a logical development of her critique of materialism via enchantment. Dohmen has alter ideas of matter in mind. Hers speak to vibrancy between/beyond humans and things more difficult to place. What if the gallery were to become jungle? What if jungle becomes bazaar? What if chalk traced the space of The Radicant? Hallucinatory aesthetics.

As counterpart to her critique of Bourriaud’s take on the altermodern and the (romanticised) figure of the art-nomad (Radicant), Dohmen seeks inspiration from Gerardo Mosquera. Both Dohmen and Mosquera remain optimistic that the contemporary art world will be transformed – Mosquera from within, Dohmen less so. Whilst Mosquera advocates a now familiar ‘horizontality’ (aka Latour et al), Dohmen’s desire to include what she terms folk and indigenous art within the remit of the contemporary is necessarily transversal. Provocative, profound. Such provocation invokes the philosophical poetics of Deleuze and Guattari – their palimpsest. For Dohmen, rather than plateaus, it is dossiers, extensive citations from anthropological texts, fictional interviews as FACTIONS to be shuffled. How magic can sear through, to become text. A Shipibo-Conibo dance song from Caimito:

Under the vault of the sky
The divine towers
Stretch to the horizon
The Inca’s parrots are standing in a row
My voice is tuneful
It all became
Just like the gods wished
We had preserved it […]
The whole world is spinning
It is spinning at the horizon.  

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13 Renate Dohmen, Encounters Beyond the Gallery, op cit, pp 82–83
Shipibo-Conibo art imparted to girls circa puberty requires native plant dyes, especially astoro. Astoro assists quënēa. Quënēa also entrances as line. Sentient of the labour required, Dohmen’s is a meditation on Peruvian geometry. For the shaman, such designs demand aesthetic propriety; they must be kikin. The master spirit of the ayahuasca is nishi ibo. At the same time the author is careful to acknowledge how the Shipibo-Conibos have adapted their textile designs to ceramics for the global tourist market. Here, as throughout the book, Dohmen shows a patient, grounded concern with anthropological fieldwork. If she conjectures visions of the shaman, this is a method that must necessarily critique important anthropological discourse. A principal source, Angelika Gebhart-Sayer, has linked ayahuasca hallucination to phosphene theory. Anthropology as projection with its own dilemmas. Dohmen qualifies her account as cultural translation. Cultural translation as ‘residues’. For Sarat Maharaj (her chosen advocate), the task of translation, the enactment of encounter requires that we safeguard ‘volatile tension’, the ‘force as a double-voicing concept’. Although never referring to Taussig on mimesis and alterity, Dohmen offers fresh insight into ‘indigenous ornamental perceptual experience’.

We return to Rikki T and her itinerant (meta)physicality. Here Bergson blurs with Calvino in her quest for ‘an inner luminosity of matter’. Rikki T/Dohmen (who frequently merge) asks: ‘Are the designs pointing to Bergson’s sub-atomic world of variation, the divergent and creative processes of nature, Deleuze’s world of simulacra, I wonder?’ Such a poetic rumination on Bergson attributes ‘imageness’ to matter. Image reflected by a living image at the level of the atom. Here the author attempts to read Bergson through Shipibo-Conibo shamanic trances. But, is a projection of western philosophy from a period of haute colonialism onto indigenous practices necessary? Can shamanic trance be read as perception at all? Bergson’s philosophy is of its age: dogged by structures and metaphors of modernity – electromagneticism, etc. Irresolution.

The author’s interpretation of Deleuze’s transformation of Bergson through the lens of liquidity is enlightening. For me, one of the highlights of the book is the author’s suggestion that La Nouvelle Vague’s fascination with water might be like the ayahuasca eye. Close by, Dohmen rightfully points out Deleuze and Guattari’s rather undervalued engagement with Lévi-Strauss.

14 Ibid, p 114
16 Dohmen, Encounters Beyond the Gallery, op cit, p 120
17 Ibid, p 135
18 Ibid
19 Ibid, p 143
As Rikki T muses and inhabits voices of philosophers and shamans, her train slips into Paris. Dohmen picks up her bag to continue on with the indigenous – women of the kolam. In Tamil Nadu, kolams are designs of the threshold. Street art, street politics, street sacrality; an ‘aesthetic of the ephemeral’ perhaps. Stone hewn to powder; sometimes the designs’ rhythm appears as a series of dots. Yantra, sacred space as cosmos, as aniconic form of divinity, kolam occupy the borders, are the wards of private dwellings and municipal buildings. As apotropaic devices they restrain: ‘Once the deity is brought into existence, there is to be no dissipation of the deity’s power. The concatenation of interlocking, unbroken lines makes entry to the centre difficult while it simultaneously binds and harnesses the power of the deity at the centre from which it cannot escape’. With Deleuze to the fore, Dohmen must ‘flux’ kolams. Kolams are far from Abanindranath Tagore’s romanticised 1916 discussion of chalk drawings (alpona) in Bengal. Dohmen’s is a world of subaltern women. In her recourse to Deleuze’s work on Francis Bacon, abstraction – it could be possible to think of kolams as grid – as the space without organs, the fissures of energy with the possibility to destroy. Potentiality is there.

For the remainder of Encounters Beyond the Gallery we occupy orchestrated cacophony and miasma; the acuity of Rikki T’s journey. If she is the artist-nomad, it is because of her anthropological knowledge, her silenced passage that usually takes place on European trains. Towards the close we must encounter relational aesthetics’ artist par excellence – Rirkrit Tiravanija and his gallery Pad Thai hospitality. Palais de Tokyo. Is there after all no escaping the centre? Bourriaud askance, Dohmen seems to align with Sara Ahmed’s call for ‘generous encounters’. In her final moments, returning to London, her physical if not spiritual home (her oblique relationship withAugé on nonplace is previously invoked), Rikki T wonders: what if Bourriaud were to invite Tamil women to fashion kolams at the Palais de Tokyo? Does this challenge the conventions of participatory aesthetics and reinforce the orientalist/primitivist spectacle of alterity associated with the colonial world’s fairs?

Although hopeful for the futurity of the decolonial and its vernacular/revolutionary potentialities, I am less optimistic than Dohmen/Rikki T. We live in the world of the decolonial abyss and all of its negative theology. Its ‘theopoetics’ and revolutionary potential are yet to be

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20 Ibid, pp 160–161
22 Ibid, p 203
determined. Abyss, trauma and violence, which cannot be reduced to the obvious (catastrophe, etc), remain present if unheard.

Following Ahmed, Dohmen advocates an ethics of ‘hearing’. As closure, *Encounters Beyond the Gallery* calls for the intermezzo as a giving between me and you. A form of hospitality that has yet to arrive, the cast of which flicker though the frames and are, with the invisible exhibition of Rikki T, brought to light. Not coextant but like Rikki T’s Deleuzian self, an interval of how the relational might be.

So, broadly, in art historical terms, *Encounters Beyond the Gallery* raises the question of contemporaneity qua the image. Despite the fetishisation of anachronism in recent times, this brings with it a tired tendency to a genealogical ‘jump cut’ in such practice in rather a confined geopolitical, even linear, manner. Instead, *Encounters Beyond the Gallery* rides chrono-space and the heterotopic. This is global art history at its very finest. The poetic intermezzo quality of Dohmen’s writing reminds us that ‘it’s not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or from below, or from left or right or right to left’. Coming away from this fine book, I find much affinity with Rikki T’s troubles: ‘I stir, and slowly come to, look out of the window, lost’.

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Natasha is also one of the Editors of *Third Text*.

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24 Dohmen, *Encounters Beyond the Gallery*, op cit, p 210
26 Dohmen, *Encounters Beyond the Gallery*, op cit, p 210