Worldmaking (Cologne, 19 Oct 26)

University of Cologne, Seminar building (106), Room 0.04, Universitätsstraße 37, 50931 Köln, Oct 19, 2026

Agnes Stillger

Worldmaking. Reflections on decolonial societal futures through exhibitions and curating

Conference with Adom Getachew (keynote), Nick Aikens and Anthony Gardner

Taking political scientist Adom Getachew's groundbreaking publication Worldmaking after Empire as a point of departure the conference explores how concepts of worldmaking are articulated through Pan-African, Global South, and anti-imperial solidarities in exhibition-making and curatorial practice. Bringing its author together with art historian Anthony Gardner and curator and researcher Nick Aikens, it examines how exhibitions have mediated transnational alliances, challenged imperial geographies, and opened spaces for imagining forms of political community beyond the nation-state.

Organization: Institute for Art and Art Theory, University of Cologne, in cooperation with the Global South Studies Center/GSSC Research Area »Co-Producing Knowledge & South-South Relations«

Programme
4:00 pm
Introduction by Prof. Nina Möntmann, University of Cologne

4:15 pm
The political imaginary, internationalism and the exhibition (Nick Aikens)

This paper puts in play three contested problematics: the political imaginary, internationalism, and exhibition making. In recent years, diverse forms of exhibition making have mapped, prefigured, and analysed social change amid globalisation, nationalism, and social fragmentation. The construct and practice of internationalism circulates through much of this work as a subject addressed through international alliances and the competing reality of a globalised art system. Recent examples include "Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrica" (curated by Antawan I. Byrd, Elvira Dyangani Ose, Adom Getachew and Matthew S. Witkovsky, 2025-26); "Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned" (curated by Bojana Piškur, 2019-ongoing); and "Decolonizing Socialism: Entangled Internationalisms" (conceived by Doreen Mende, 2020-24). Exhibitions offer space, physical and speculative, for internationalism to be constellated and tested. Extending ideas from my own exhibitionary inquiry "Rewinding Internationalism" (2021-23), I use the political imaginary as a heuristic to understand how exhibitions produce, transmit and mediate political ideas around internationalism, proposing the exhibition as an instantiation of the imaginary and internationalism as a form of political imaginary.

The presentation is based upon collaborative research at the Centre for Art and the Political Imaginary conducted by Prof Mick Wilson and myself, and funded by the Swedish Research Council.

Nick Aikens is a curator, researcher, editor and educator. He is Researcher at HDK-Valand, University of Gothenburg and Managing Editor / Research Responsible for L'Internationale Online.

5:00 pm
Biennials after Colony? (Anthony Gardner)

The large-scale, recurrent exhibitions known as biennials have a conflicted relationship with both worldmaking and colony. On the one hand, their aim to encapsulate a kind of global cosmopolitanism – through their vast scale that brings together artists from around the world – has sought a particular kind of worldmaking. On the other hand, that worldmaking was born of 19th century colonial-modern ambitions that persist today through their reliance on extracted resources, let alone their viral spread during global neoliberalisation since the early 1990s. This paper teases out some of the complexities in this tension, with a focus on how biennials today, in cities such as Jogjakarta, Sharjah and Diriyah, often based far beyond the North Atlantic, engage with or respond to that conflicted relationship. This paper presents some preliminary research ideas, touching on questions that a new wave of biennials in the "Global South" are posing at a time when the age of biennials would seem otherwise to be coming to a close.

Anthony Gardner is Professor of Contemporary Art History at the University of Oxford, where he is also the Director of Graduate Studies at the Ruskin School of Art and a Fellow of The Queen's College.

5:45 – 6:00 pm – Break

6:00 pm
Scales of Worldmaking (Adom Getachew)

Drawing on the recent exhibition Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrica, this talk considers how body and world are brought to together in new configurations. Rather than view worldmaking as an enterprise that transcends the scales of the intimate and the national, the works examined here suggest that worlds are made in and through practices of scalar collapse that include embodiment and personification.

Adom Getachew is Chair of Race, Diaspora & Indigeneity and Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. She is the author of Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination (2019) and co-editor, with Jennifer Pitts, of W. E. B. Du Bois: International Thought (2022). As part of a four-member curatorial team, she curated the exhibition Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrica and co-edited the accompanying catalogue. Currently, Adom is working on a second book on the intellectual origins and political practices of Garveyism.

7:00 pm – Reception with drinks and snacks for speakers and participants.

Registration required. Please register by email to a.stillger@uni-koeln.de

Reference:

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