

Discovering 'Glocality': Jens Kull and the Contemporary Conditions of Place and Placelessness

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What we are witnessing in the era of globalization seems to be a new stage in world development, not unlike the Enlightenment, that is affecting the political, social, economic, historical, and cultural situations of people all over the globe. We are facing a chaotic world in which every cultural space, every edge, every form of theoretical knowledge is about to be epistemologically rearticulated in order to identify the genealogy of the global subject.

This genealogy should be explored so that the others do not remain other...

—Philippe Vergne, "Globalization from the Rear: 'Would You Care to Dance, Mr. Malevich?'" in *How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age* (2003)



Philippe Vergne's alignment of globalization with ongoing historical, conceptual, and theoretical 're-mappings' and 're-visitations' is a compelling proposition—as such challenging of once-unquestionable 'grand narratives' serves as the foundation of many postmodern art practices in the twenty-first century. Ours is a world in which the modernist binaries of 'center/periphery', 'North/South', 'Western/non-Western', 'artistic/anthropological', and 'city/country' (to name just a few) flex and fail when artists employ them. The 'flex' comes about largely due to Derrida's notion of 'play'—in which seemingly constant signs and signifiers lose their stability because they are read and implemented by a range of audiences, each with its own agenda of meaning-making (or meaning-breaking).¹ The 'failure' occurs as sign systems, once thought or fantasized to be universal, are lost in translation (think of how airplanes changed their informational placards from "No Smoking" in English to a more universally legible and culturally non-specific symbolic system: ⊕), are found to be incompatible with the cultures in which they are used (think of the various attitudes to photography—from legitimate art form to a mechanical 'thief' of human spirit), or are forcibly resisted as an affront to tradition (think of some Aboriginal artists' refusal to use synthetic paints since they materially embody the intrusion of European culture into indigenous Australia).² On the one hand, globalization has facilitated our knowledge of and interactions with other cultures, but on the other it has duped us into believing that such knowledge and interaction is authentic, significant, and true. Artists, such as Xu Bing in his 2001 work, *The Living Word*, rely on the 'unfamiliar local' as a springboard into more globally understandable, universal meanings—as the Chinese calligraphic character, *niao* (meaning 'bird'), is used to provide a rote definition of 'bird' in Cantonese, but then is physically altered to fashion the more recognizable form of a bird that rises up from the floor and 'flies' through the gallery. Other artists, such as Yinka Shonibare, begin with the coziness of the 'familiar local' to highlight its suffocation of other, equally valid places and systems.

¹ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. London & New York: Routledge, 1966, pp. 278-294.

² For further reading about the social and anthropological challenging of center/periphery thinking and the failure of unilateral sign systems, see Arjun Appadurai, "Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28.2 (April 1986): pp. 356-361.

His *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996-1997) uses typical Victorian furniture covered in unlikely batik fabrics—a material with African, European colonialist, and Indonesian histories. Such visual and material complexities illustrate how globalization is a potent force in the contemporary art world, with the power to re-script histories using new, self-determined vocabularies and experiences—what Paulo Herkenhoff might call a “reformulat[ion] rather than [a] refus[al of] the relationship with tradition and past.”³

It is at this point of tension between the local and the global—a theoretical and creative juncture rightly called the ‘glocal’ by Roland Robertson in the 1990s⁴—that Jens Kull’s practice vividly asserts itself. In one of his most compelling works, *Numb Pulse* (2008), Kull maps a rapid trajectory from the uninterrupted, neo-Romantic landscape (Constablesque blue skies and the singular plane flying through it far above) to an aerial traffic jam of planes—criss-crossing spaces directly above us on what appear to be (but are not) collision courses, placing their intentions into question, unsettling the more aesthetic relationships that the plane-as-object establishes with viewers when the piece begins. Kull’s work recalls other pieces in which the plane enters as a powerful influence: Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Flugplatz Weld/World Airport* (1999) in which haphazardly constructed plane models are connected umbilically to a central watch tower; Cai Guo-Qiang’s *Bon Voyage: 10,000 Collectables from the Airport* (2004), a vine-enlaced replica of a cargo plane festooned with sharp objects banned from aircraft in a post-9/11 world; or Jeffrey Milstein’s attempts to use still photography to transform the dynamic nature of aircraft into petrified and more modernist ‘art objects’. Yet, Kull manages to confront all of these issues—danger, congestion, beauty, cacophony, and the unpredictability of globalization’s imperatives of movement and change—whilst creating subtle parallels between the airborne business ‘up there’ and the issues of distance, space, and intention that characterize everyday life on the ground. Perhaps serving as the contemporary meditation on J.M.W. Turner’s *Rain, Steam, and Speed – The Great Western Railway* (1844), a hazy, typically Romantic urban landscape punctured by a hurtling train belching thick black smoke, Kull’s *Numb Pulse* evidences our desensitization to familiar and now-necessary technologies, yet ‘reprograms’ our ways of thinking about their relationship to us. The vast expanse of sky with which Kull begins, and the sense of normalcy and place that we ascribe to it, transform into a realm of the loud and the unlikely—producing a state of placelessness that ultimately questions whether globalization really connects us or confuses us.

Such confusion could be forgiven the visitor who first flies into Mexico City’s Benito Juárez International Airport—not so much in terms of the airport itself (which is clean, orderly, and nondescript as most airports are), but in terms of the heaving metropolis that is clearly visible even as the plane begins its descent. Mexico City’s outskirts radiate far enough out from its center that they can be seen at 35,000 feet, about 15-20 minutes prior to landing, and as houses, streets, and billboards come into view, the city’s sheer sprawl is punctuated by flashes of color: vividly adorning small shacks in the city’s poorer neighborhoods, surfacing in large posters and advertisements with competing multinational and local flavors, rising up as a visible other to the city’s sometimes-monotonous sea of grey concrete. The aerial view one takes in of this city of

³ Paulo Herkenhoff, introduction to *Núcleo histórico: antropofagia e histórias de canibalismos*, exhibition catalogue. São Paulo: XXIV Bienal de São Paulo, 1998: p. 42.

⁴ See Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage Publications, 1992.

21+ million people sows an immediate sense of disorientation, but Kull's *Still* (2006) serves as a clever and compelling insight into the city's iconic constancies and its ongoing architectural, social, cultural, and infrastructural metamorphoses. The Volkswagen Beetle—long a favorite car of post-World War II hipsters and made in its original Type I design in Mexico until finally being discontinued in 2003—is ubiquitous on Mexico City's roadways. It is the predictable lens through which Mexico City's uncertainties and unpredictabilities can be read. Kull's *Still*, which cycles through over 500 photographs of various *vochos* (as they are affectionately called in Mexico) at a rate of ten photographs per second in View-Master-style, provides a dizzying journey through the streets of *la capital*. The VW serves as the colonialist backdrop to and connective tissue between disparate areas of the supermetropolis—rich, poor, commercial, residential, decaying, rebuilt—and while the cars' colors change (from the greens and whites of taxis to the reds and oranges of pimped rides), its presence helps to unify a city difficult to 'read' and experience because of its size, unboundedness, and ceaseless activity. Of course, Kull reveals to the viewer that any attempts to understand or process this web of urban landscapes against which the cars are set remain elusive—reinforcing the almost-contradictory impossibility of stillness in a city that celebrates speed and change. Most importantly, Kull's work unpacks the complex relationship between the Mexican local and the global—photographing a range of quaint and sometimes-unfamiliar localities, but ensuring that they are read against the globally familiar Beetle. Does the viewer's understanding of this familiar vehicle change when it must be read against a locale that many have never visited (or are afraid to visit)? Do we understand 'Mexicanness' more readily after engaging with Kull's piece or does the rapid-fire pace of globalization fool us into believing that we know more than we really do?

Still might leave viewers with a desire for calm and quietness—not necessarily features of the rushed urban landscapes of which Kull is so fond. Yet, his video work *Left Over* (2008) provides such a moment of serenity, even if that moment seems eerily macabre and unexceptional. The flux of the city continues in the background of the work as cars dart in and out of driveways and intersections, unsuspecting passersby walk around the dead bird, and the wind blows around bits of dust and trash along the street. Recorded in a street that could be *any* street in Mexico City (or the world for that matter), the video focuses in on the two issues that inform Raymond Williams' understanding of contemporary experience: 'knowable communities' and the 'structure of feeling'.⁵ Kull's environment is knowable because of its resonance with our own, but its semiotic power is enhanced by a series of quick, yet effective, transactions—the raven's eyeballing of its helpless prey, its zeroing in on its opportunity, and its deft scavenging of the bird's corpse and subsequent flight. The piece's beauty moves beyond the pathos of Kull's extended documentation of a single, unremarkable illustration of the survival of the fittest and, instead, encourages the viewer to take pause and to map more meaningful relationships between the senses and a city that largely obliterates or overwhelms them.

⁵ See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 1973. The text explores, among other Marxist issues, the varying historical roles of the artist in making urban and rural places more familiar and known through description, analysis, narration, and memory.

Jens Kull's artistic savviness surfaces as he incorporates technology as the critical mediator between a visually dynamic and increasingly globalized world and viewers whose own experiences and histories varyingly act as portals into and obstacles impeding access to the localities from which he draws inspiration. Kull's work both confronts and comforts, as the familiar rhetorics and iconographies of our world reveal new relationships and dissonances with localities many have yet to encounter. It is in this interstice—what Homi Bhabha might call 'the join'⁶—between the local and the global, between place and placelessness, between familiarity and foreignness, that Kull's powerful works find their voice.

⁶ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London & New York: Routledge, 1994. See especially pp. 1-18. 'Glocality' represents this kind of join or negotiation/confrontation between two disparate imperatives—that of local authenticity and that of global relevance and universality.