

# The Turns of the Global

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## INTRODUCTION. THE CONCEPT OF TURN<sup>1</sup>

As Irit Rogoff argues in the essay “Turning”,<sup>2</sup> one of the questions to ask when we use the term “turn” concerns the etymological origin of this word and, especially, its use at a time marked by the need to rewrite new narratives in the light of the challenges inherent in global art. After assuming that the -isms, styles, and artistic tendencies of modernism and the creative conditions (such as appropriationism, simulationism, and activism) of post-modernism have been superseded, the recourse to the “turn” seeks new urgencies, such as that of attending to approaches that are more contextual and circular in character than philological and/or linear. What are we referring to when we speak of the turn to delimit that which particularises and differentiates the work of practitioners of the geographical, ecological, ethnographic, historical, documentary, and cosmopolitan turns? Are we talking about a reading strategy? About an interpretive model, as would be derived from the linguistic turn of the 1970s, or rather about a stratigraphic structure that could be read across multiple cultural practices? Do we wish to read one system by means of another system, in a way that one nurtures the other so that it can open us up to other forms of being? Or is it rather about a generative movement in which a new horizon emerges in the process, leaving behind the practice that was its point of departure?

The recurrence of “turn” in place of style, -ism, or tendency would ultimately respond to a clear urgency of the contemporary global world: a movement characterised by aesthetic pluralism, by the simultaneousness of various *modus operandi*, and by a great multiplicity of languages that constantly change their state, while having many features in common. And turn would also allow, that in the space of the contemporary, of here and now, a great diversity

<sup>1</sup> *The Turns of the Global* is part of the book *El arte en la era de lo global, 1989-2015* published by Alianza Editorial (Madrid, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Irit ROGOFF, “Turning”, in *e-flux* (No. 0, 2008). Available at [www.e-flux.com/journal/00/68470/turning/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/00/68470/turning/) (consulted 6 April 2015).

of stories from all around the world that should be confronted simultaneously in an intellectual outlook that is continuous and disjunctive, essential to understanding the present as a whole.

The endless production of difference in the art world is not only the result of the cohabitation of various national identities, but is also a consequence of the way in which artists, curators, and theorists seek to present positions (the turns) within this field, turns that would overlap, intertwine, and inhabit different places, maintaining equidistant relationships with universal ideas. And this in an international art world where stylistic *linguas francas* seem to have disappeared, but which does not wish to renounce a certain formal complexity.

Together with turn, the word network is fundamental for understanding how artists contact each other, work together, take part in the same critical discussions, and do so at points of transition that are still within their decidedly individual trajectories.

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# THE GEOGRAPHICAL TURN



## The new places and territories of a discursive geography

When, in 2003 within the discursive framework of the show *Geography and Politics of Mobility*, the artist and curator Ursula Biemann — known for her commitment to questions of migration, gender, and globalisation — adopted the term geography as the main *leitmotif* of the exhibition, it was clear that this had nothing to do with geography as a discipline of geophysics but with questions related to the transformative quality of places and geographies at a time in which individuals were not obliged to remain in the same place.

Ursula Biemann indicated that geographical thinking had become, through globalisation, the most fundamental and decisive instrument of analysis,<sup>1</sup> and highlighted the importance of the postmodern understanding of geography as a distinct means to organise knowledge according to the way in which the natural, the social, and the cultural are related to each other. The geographical model then functions as a theoretical platform from which to think about the social in an expanded way that includes concepts of borders, connectivity, and transgression. Geography examines the places that are not only constructed by people who live in them but by all kinds of connections and movements that cross them in a variety of scales that range from the local, private, and intimate to the public, transitional, and economic. As Biemann claims:

We notice an abundance of images of fluid, unfixed, and transitional identities in circulation at present. These increasingly recognized qualities of identity are partially a result of transgender discourses but also of cyber mobility and physical migration as well as a general increase in travelling and repeated or multiple chains of human movement. No doubt, the fast spread of information technologies and the liberalization of post-socialist countries had a definitive impact on

<sup>1</sup> Ursula BIEMANN, “Geography and the Politics of Mobility”, in Ursula BIEMANN (ed.) *Geography and the Politics of Mobility* (exhibition catalogue), Vienna, Generali Foundation, 2003, p. 21.



the mobility of people since the early nineties. But migration has always existed and travelling people too.<sup>2</sup>

Ursula Biemann, in emphasising the importance of places, of human paths, and the traffic of signs and visual information, is but part of a lengthy genealogy of art thinkers and theorists who — since the end of the 1980s, and specifically since the emblematic date of 1989 — have opted for the cultural production of space in line with the thinking inaugurated by Edward Soja, who in *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Theory* (1989)<sup>3</sup> presented postmodern geography as a way of deconstructing the modern logic of space in which reality led to ideology. Under the influence of Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia and Henri Lefebvre's reflections in the text *La production de l'espace* (1974),<sup>4</sup> Soja formulated his theory of the "third space", a space of alterity, of confrontation, and of interbreeding, a space of union between the real and the imaginary, and of overcoming the binary logic of modernity (class, gender, race) in the search for new spaces created by difference. The space is never something given, argues Soja. It is not a closed box to be filled, but is only a phase of a mere background staging. And in all these cases, we are talking about a space that refers to a wider concept — that of spatiality, understood as a socially produced space. As Bertrand Westphal argues, it would be a "third space" of possibilities for a cultural politics of difference and identity that is seen as radically postmodern and consciously specialised from its origins.<sup>5</sup>

Spatiality is a social product, part of a second nature, an essential aspect of human life and of a description of the world. Soja considers three forms of spatial thinking: perceived space, conceived space, and lived space. If the theorists of modernity recognised only two types of space — the perceived and the conceived — Soja identifies a third aspect of spatiality in itself, an aspect that goes beyond all physical and mental construction, but which incorporates and transcends both of these. Soja uses the concept of third space to define a radical way of thinking that proposes an alternative to all binary conceptions of space. The third space would be created under the effects of a changing cul-

2 Ursula BIEMANN, "Geography and the Politics of Mobility", p. 21.

3 Edward W. SOJA, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London, Verso, 1989.

4 Henri LEFEBVRE, *La Production de l'espace*, Paris, Anthropos, 1974.

5 Bertrand WESTPHAL, "Edward Soja ou la poétique du décentrement", in *Centquatrevue* (Paris, 2008, p. 10).

ture and would be a place of simultaneousness and intertwining, always seeking a socio-political transformation.

Against the first space — the perceived space that consists of concrete spatial forms, things which can be empirically mapped — and in relation to the second space — the conceived space, a space constructed in mental or cognitive forms and which would ultimately be a representation of power and ideology — the third space (which Soja also calls lived space) consists of social and spatial practices and incorporates the world of experiences, emotions, and political choices. It is a space that is directly lived, the space of inhabitants and users, and at the same time it simultaneously contains other spaces, both real and imaginary. The lived space is superimposed on the physical space, making a symbolic use of its objects, and it tends to be expressed in systems of non-verbal symbols and signs.<sup>6</sup>

The art historian Thomas DaCosta Kauffmann, in his reflections in *Toward a Geography of Art* (2004), also contrasts the chronological way and the historical methodology, emphasising the spatial aspects of analysis not only of events and objects — including art and architecture — but also of their antecedents, their causes, and their effects, among which human artefacts are considered to be a significant element. Kaufmann refers to a human geography that takes into account the impact of the physical environment on human beings and which leads us irrevocably to cultural geography, dedicated to studying the expansion of human cultures around the globe and the object of the new discipline of the geography of art.

## Geography and visual culture

In the context of these times of ethnic cleansing, forced migration, disputed borders, and nations in crisis, a question imposes itself: How to project questions of place and identity, of belonging and exclusion, in the field of visual culture? And in this vein, the theorist and art historian Irit Rogoff has made a fundamental contribution in the text *Terra Infirma. Geography's Visual Culture*. Rogoff defines her work as a subject in formation that does not deal with either identity politics or works of art that refer to the iconography of geography. Neither is it a study of cultural geography or an exercise in creating geographical metaphors around the fields of cultural production. On the contra-

<sup>6</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Cambridge (Mass.), Blackwell, 1996, pp. 130-131.

ry, what Rogoff seeks to do is firstly to trace links between the dislocation of individuals and the disruption of collective narratives and languages of signification in the field of vision and, secondly, to carry out an epistemological investigation that privileges the emergent rhetoric of the processes of deterritorialisation under the common arena of geography.<sup>7</sup>

And, Rogoff asks in the introduction, why the recourse to geography? Geography, like the discourses of space and spatialisation, makes possible a critical discourse that affects a set of material conditions in the lives of subjects linked to their psychic subjectivities. “Homeless” geography allows the redefinition of aspects of place far from the specific needs of belonging and not belonging that are determined by the state:

I was drawn to try to work in the arena of geography because it seemed possible to locate within its revised understanding an alternative set of relations between subjects and places — an alternative set of relations in which it is not scientific knowledge or the national categories of state which determine both belonging and unbelonging, but rather linked sets of political insights, memories, subjectivities, projections of fantasmatic desires and great long chains of sliding signifiers.<sup>8</sup>

Rogoff understands geography as an epistemic category, just like gender or race — categories that share a commitment to the concept of belonging, which work around the dichotomies of the self and the other, and around other strategies of emplacement and displacement. Geography would be a system of classification, as location, a place for collective, national, cultural, linguistic, and topographic stories. But Rogoff’s challenge is not limited to this new theorisation of geography, as she also seeks to extrapolate it to the field of visual culture, going beyond the 1970s project of the social history of art which, for the first time, allowed that notions of class, gender, race, and language penetrate the analysis of visual representation, and which initiated the process of the de-hierarchisation of images within culture.

Hence geography, following the work of two generations of postmodern geographers and theorists of the urban space (Henri Lefebvre, Rosalind Deutsche, Dennis Wood, Cornelia Vismann, and Victor Burgin), became an epistemological structure whose practices not only concerned economic and national relationships but also identity issues and, in particular, various signs

7 Irit ROGOFF, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 1-2.

8 Irit ROGOFF, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture*, p. 7.

and systems of a geographic nature. Signs and systems such as borders, bodies, luggage, and cartography, which Rogoff ties to certain aspects of contemporary visual cultural production, from traditional forms of painting to photography, video, and installation — within the wide framework of conceptual art — with examples such as Hans Haacke, Joshua Glotman, Mona Hatoum, Joshua Neustein, Guillermo Gómez Peña, Ana Mendieta, and Michal Rovner.

Following this discursive line, one should highlight the reflections of Nato Thompson, as well as those of the artist and geographer Trevor Paglen, in the text *Experimental Geography. Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism*.<sup>9</sup> After noting the connections between the new geography and Henri Lefebvre's concept of the "production of space", according to which humans create the world that surrounds them and, in turn, are created by this same world that encloses them,<sup>10</sup> Paglen asks how to link these new axioms of geography with cultural production and also with the old discipline of the history of art. After recognising the interdisciplinary character of contemporary geography, he goes on to claim that while the axioms of the new geography can guide all kinds of practice and research, nonetheless a geographical approach to art performs a clear revision of the disciplines of history and criticism, as they have traditionally been conceived. A geographer interested in art would start from very different premises from those of an art critic:

To speak very generally, the conceptual framework organizing much art history and criticism is one of 'reading culture', where questions and problems of representation (and their consequences) are of primary concern. In the traditional model, the critic's task is to describe, elaborate upon, explain, interpret, evaluate, and critique pre-given cultural works. In a certain sense, the art critic's role is to act as a discerning consumer of culture.<sup>11</sup>

9 Nato THOMSON, "In Two Directions: Geography as Art, Art as Geography", and Trevor PAGLEN, "Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space", included in the exhibition catalogue *Experimental Geography. Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism*. The touring show was exhibited at the Richard E. Peelert Art Center, DePau University, Greencastle, Indiana, 19 September–12 December 2009; at the Rochester Art Center, Rochester, Minnesota, 7 February–18 April 2009; at the Albuquerque Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 28 June–20 September 2009, and at the Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine, 21 February–30 May 2010.

10 According to Trevor Paglen, the human condition would be characterised by a feedback loop between human activity and our material environment. From this, it is deduced that space, more than being a container for human activities, would be produced actively precisely through human activity itself. See Trevor PAGLEN, "Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space", p. 39.

11 Trevor PAGLEN, "Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space", p. 29.

On the contrary, a good geographer can use the analytical axioms that belong to the discipline to focus on the problem of art from a different point of view. Instead of asking, “What is art?” or “Is this art successful?”, a good geographer would pose questions along the lines of “What is this space that is called art like?” or “What are the historical, economic, cultural, and discursive conjunctions that make up something called ‘art’ and, on the other hand, produce a space that is colloquially known as the ‘world of art?’” From this, one can deduce that the geographical question is not so much interested in *why* art is as in *what* art is. And thus, rather than approaching art from the privileged point of view of consumption, a critical geographer can reformat the question of art in terms of a spatial practice.<sup>12</sup>

Conceived in terms of spatial practice, art is not only interested in objects but also in the ways in which distinct actions participate in the production of space. And in this case geography not only constitutes a method of research but also necessarily involves the production of the research space. Geographers can analyse the production of space, but through this study they are also producing space. Geographers not only study geography: they produce geographies in what the author identifies as “experimental geography.”

## The geographical exhibitions

One of the first exhibitions that echoed this new epistemic dimension of geography — and its implicit commitment to questions of belonging around the dichotomies of self and other and the strategies of emplacement and displacement — was *GNS. Global Navigation System* (2003),<sup>13</sup> in which Nicolas Bourriaud, using the anonymous 1929 map *Le Monde au Temps des surréalistes*,<sup>14</sup> proposed how in a deterritorialised world remodelled by technology, geography competes not only with hard science but also with artists who approach it from a perspective that is both poetic and critical. Contrary to the “world-surface” of land art, today’s art describes a “planet-plateau” with a succession of stages and decorations in which to live, with multiple networks in which we

<sup>12</sup> Trevor PAGLEN, “Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space”, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> *GNS. Global Navigation System* (exhibition catalogue), Palais de Tokyo Site de Création Contemporaine, Paris, Cercle d’Art, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> This concerns the map published in the special edition of the Belgian magazine *Variétés*, “Le Surréalisme en 1929” (June 1929).

move, circuits through which we displace ourselves and, above all, economic, social, and political formations that delineate human territories.

Hence Bourriaud's choice of a set of artists such as Mark Lombardi, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Franz Ackermann, Wim Delvoye, Thomas Hirschhorn, Pierre Huygue, Pierre Joseph, and Bureau d'études — among others — who make use of maps, plans, satellite images, and social studies with the obsession of describing the planet and using its spaces with the help of investigations, staging, and stories. This would bring Bourriaud to describe a good part of contemporary art as an “off-shore” zone: neither totally integrated into society nor taking on the role of a neutral observer. A zone which defines itself by keeping distances, alternating committed expedition in the heart of the real and separation in the comfort that is procured by extra-territoriality. As Bourriaud argues: “Art is a map of the world which jumps from one scale to another, passing indifferently from 1/1,000,000 to 1/1; the distance is the same, but the focus and the mode of capture change, in the image and likeness of photography via satellite.”<sup>15</sup>

And as Irit Rogoff<sup>16</sup> has noted, another of the works that from the curatorial field tackled the visual dimension of the new postmodern geography was the previously mentioned show *Geography and the Politics of Mobility*, in which Ursula Biemann linked the new geography with questions of mobility, both human and that related to electronic networks within the well-defined zone of “fortress Europe”. To find answers to the question about what role should be performed by art in maintaining relationships between Western Europe and other minority contexts both European and non-European, Biemann backed projects produced purposely by international artists such as Bureau d'études (France), Frontera Sur RRVT (Spain and Switzerland), Makrolab (Slovenia), Multiplicity (Italy), and Raqs Media Collective (India), that adopted different forms of collaboration and temporary alliances with the aim of conferring meaning on inhabited spaces.

## Mobility in the curatorial framework

The way was already prepared for some of the exhibitions with a spatial and geographical focus that were held during the first decade of the 21<sup>ST</sup> century. Mi-

<sup>15</sup> Nicolas BOURRIAUD, “Topocritique: l'art contemporain et l'investigation géographique”, in *GNS*, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Irit ROGOFF, *Terra Infirmis: Geography's Visual Culture*, pp. 1-2.

gration, mobility, dialogue between the local and the global (in most cases under the South-South axis) were some of the subjects favoured by curators, whether of alternative artistic spaces and the peripheral biennials or of thematic exhibitions of an institutional character in museums, both large and small. Under the so-called “mobility turn”,<sup>17</sup> which seeks to reconcile — in the context that Joaquín Barriendos describes as the “geoaesthetic turn”<sup>18</sup> — the politics of mobility with contemporary subjectivity, uniting the mobility of subjects with the components of contemporary cognitive capitalism, it would be necessary to cite a series of curatorial projects such as *Crossings* (1999), *Migration* (2003), *Migrating Identity* (2004), *On Mobility* (2004), and *Movimiento doble. Estéticas migratorias* (2007), for which the physical dimension of mobility made sense only when united to its symbolic dimension with the aim of proceeding to a deconstruction of the classic postcolonial map. What is interesting here would be the “social physics” of mobility,<sup>19</sup> in the sense of how displacements (those derived both from exile or diaspora and from migration or nomadism) transform the social context in which they are inscribed, thus changing the network of meanings that are the fruit of the interweaving of the movement of bodies and the cultural representation of space.

One of the first exhibitions that investigated the cartography resulting from transcultural relationships offered by the international art system was *Crossings* (1998),<sup>20</sup> which put forward —with artists such as Cai Guo-Qiang, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Carlos Capelán, Jimmie Durham, Mona Hatoum, Alfredo Jaar, Ilya Kabakov, Kcho, Yinka Shonibare, Jana Sterbak, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Xu Bing, and Jin-me Yoon — questions about exile, hybrid identities, and cultural dislocation in cities as distant and distinct from each

17 Peter ADEY and Paul BEVAN, “Between the physical and the virtual: Connected mobility?”, in John URRY and Mimi SELLER (eds.), *Mobile Technologies of the City*, London, Routledge, 2006, pp. 44-60.

18 As Joaquín Barriendos argues: “Echoing the anthropological turn and its impact on the area of cultural tourism, new technologies, the new ethnology of urban imaginaries and the consequences of that which is known as the critique of the social production of space, the politics of mobility have provided a profound decentring regarding the way in which it is possible to conceive subjectivity geographically today.” See Joaquín BARRIENDOS, “El arte global y las políticas de la movilidad: Desplazamientos (trans)culturales en el sistema internacional del arte contemporáneo”, *Liminar: Estudios Sociales y Humanísticos* (Vol. 5, no. 1, January–June 2007, p. 161). See also, by the same author, “Geoesthetic Hierarchies: Geography, Geopolitics, Global Art, and Coloniality”, in James ELKINS, Zhivka VALLA-VICHARSKA, and Alice KIM (eds.), *Art and Globalization*, University Park (Pennsylvania), Penn State University Press, 2010, pp. 245-250.

19 Joaquín BARRIENDOS, “El arte global y las políticas de la movilidad: Desplazamientos (trans)culturales en el sistema internacional del arte contemporáneo”, p. 163.

20 *Crossings* (exhibition catalogue), Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 7 August–1 November 1998, p. 12.