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Kevin D. Murray
RMIT University, Melbourne, kevin@kevinmurray.com.au

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South Ways: Art Undercurrents Across the South

Kevin D. Murray *

RMIT University, Melbourne

Abstract

A series of projects attempted to explore a southern perspective for global visual art. The South Project was a series of gatherings across the latitude to develop a south-south network and conversation. This was followed by an intellectual push through Southern Theory to diversity academic frameworks beyond the trans-Atlantic. The application of this to visual arts was explored with the project South Ways, which involved developing particular verbs for creative engagements - to bestow, to open, to swap and to glean. Such ventures involve a promise yet to be realised - that the orientation of visual arts towards the South can involve people of the South themselves, both popular and elite.

Résumé

Il est des projets qui tentent d'adopter une perspective Sud sur la création artistique mondiale. Le *South Projet*, présenté dans cet article, consistait dans une série de rencontres d'acteurs issus de la même latitude, dont le but était de développer un réseau et une conversation de Sud à Sud. La rencontre donna lieu à une poussée intellectuelle de la *South Theory*, visant à déployer les cadres académiques au-delà du transatlantique. L'application de ces idées aux arts plastiques fut entreprise à travers le projet *South Ways*, qui supposait de mettre à l'œuvre plusieurs verbes à des fins créatives : donner, ouvrir, échanger et glaner. Ces événements reposent sur une promesse encore non tenue, à savoir que l'orientation des arts plastiques vers le Sud peut impliquer les habitants du Sud eux-mêmes, des couches populaires jusqu' à l'élite.

** Dr. Kevin Murray is Adjunct Professor at RMIT School of Art and Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne. He is Managing Editor of Garland Magazine, coordinator of Southern Perspectives and editor of the Online Encyclopedia of Crafts in the Asia Pacific Region. His area of curatorial specialisation is the social object.*

Context

The concept of South as used here is primarily an assertion that place is a necessary context for aesthetic value. What might otherwise seem to be universal frameworks for art, such as Kantian ideal of creative freedom, are situated instead in the North and aligned with the dynamics of its metropolitan centres, particularly class and empire. This isn't to say that there is no place for these concepts in the South, but that their relevance cannot be taken for granted, especially opposition to other values, such as social and environmental connectedness. This thinking builds on the history of postcolonialism, such as Edward Said's deconstruction of the East in *Orientalism* (1978) and Franz Fanon's critique of French colonialism.¹ As I will discuss later, the parallel concept of South is most developed in social theory. Its implications for the understanding of art practice is still nascent.

Before I go further, I need to account for my voice as a citizen of Australia. Australia is an extractivist settler nation that has largely ignored its position in the South in favour of models inherited from Europe and North America. Until recently, the colonial imagination was fired by nationalist tropes like 'Downunder,' the 'Great Southern Land' and 'Southern Cross,' but these are mere clichés in a neoliberal state that is more concerned with the people it can exclude than the shared stories it can generate from within.

Charles de Gaulle was rumoured to have said of Brazil, that 'it is a country of the future, and always will be'. So in Australia, our place in the world remains, paradoxically, a distant horizon. But as Paulin Hountondji remarked "culture is not only a heritage, it is a project."² The South is our project, to be more than a colonial outpost. Australia's distance from the centre has potential to open a space for new possibilities.

¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Vol. 1 (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

² Marshall Sahlins, "On the Anthropology of Modernity, Or, Some Triumphs of Culture over Despondency Theory," in *Culture and Sustainable Development in the Pacific*, edited by Antony Hooper (Canberra: ANU Press, 2005).

Also before going further I should clarify my use of the term 'south.' Though it seems uncomfortable in a globalised world to offer spatial limits, I do use 'south' as a political reality, more than a convenient trope. Jorge Luis Borges proposed that "universal history is the history of various intonations of a few metaphors."³ Derrida proposed light was one of these key metaphors,⁴ evident since Plato in the symbol of knowledge as enlightenment. The spatial framework implied by the idea of South could be considered among these key metaphors. The meaning of South is predicated on the concept of a vertical hierarchy, where value lies above.

Global 'South' is an improvement on 'Third World', but it's not as incisive as 'Majority World.' Though it might be tempting we can alter reality by changing names, 'South' cannot be readily transposed. South is a real fixed phenomenon, what Paul Ricoeur calls the *vestrictsein* (living imbrication).⁵ By convention I fly from Melbourne up to Paris, though we experience of the world in the long run as an even plane. 'Going south' has become synonymous with failure. This is a phenomenological function embedded in how we see the world. We live in metaphors, which suits some better than others. Just as blackness is historically tainted with ignorance, so 'southern' is by default lowly.

The Biennale Dream

The story begins with the quest for civic identity. Sydney and Melbourne are Australia's rival cities. Missing the nature-given attractions of Sydney, Melbourne identifies more with man-made elements, such as its architecture. Through its Major Events strategy, Melbourne also seeks to find a place in the international circuit through programs like the Formulae One Grand Prix. But

³ Jorge Luis Borges, "Pascal's Sphere," in *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952*, translated by Ruth L. C. Simms, 1st British ed. (London: Souvenir Press, 1973).

⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978)

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Vol1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 75.

an important piece has been missing. Though originating many of the artistic movements in Australia, Melbourne lacks a place in the international visual arts calendar. Finally, in 1999, it acquired its first, and only, visual arts biennale. Mostly praised by local critics, the event proved a financial disaster. In the end, the Melbourne Biennial didn't receive the same kind of international funding support that was already directed towards Sydney, one of the oldest biennales. At a forum in RMIT Gallery, the godfather of biennales, Rene Block, explained cruelly that there was just 'no room on the carousel' for Melbourne. It was too similar to Sydney, which was already established, and did not have the exotic appeal of new members like Istanbul or Gwangju.

This led to many discussions about what it meant to have a biennale in Melbourne. Was there an alternative model? Brisbane had shown how it was possible to consolidate a place in the international calendar outside the carousel, in the Asia Pacific Triennial. Rather than try to inveigle oneself into an existing circuit, the Art Gallery of Queensland had created a new set of exchanges framed by an east-west dialogue between Australia and the cultures of its region. At a public discussion at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in 2000, the Brisbane model was explored and the question asked—what new international space could Melbourne help open up?

At that time, the democratic turn in many countries in the South were relatively fresh. Nelson Mandela had just stepped down as President of the new South Africa. In Latin America, countries like Chile, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay had broken with the military dictatorships of the 1970s. The 20th century story of the South as a region of tin-pot dictators and banana republics was no longer relevant. Boycott was not the most appropriate ethical engagement with the South. In this context, it seemed that a triennial style event in Melbourne could provide a new space for trying out exchanges with these reformed countries along southern latitudes.

South Project



Figure 1. Speakers at South 1, South Project, Melbourne 2004, photograph by Gary Warner.

In 2003, the South Project was initiated and heads of the city's cultural institutions came together to endorse a future APT style event in Melbourne. In the meantime, however, most of the leading visual arts organisations like the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art reverted back to architecture as a forum of ambition. New buildings like Federation Square testified to Melbourne's cultural value. It was left to a relatively marginal organisation, Craft Victoria, to carry the baton of the South. For a craft organisation, the South Project offered not only the potential to forge south-south alliances, it also provided a way to engage with craft practice in an otherwise highly conceptual visual arts scene. The rationale for this came from the relative importance of craft as a means of both livelihood and cultural identity in many countries of the South.⁶

Rather than see this developmentally as evidence of a cultural backwardness, the challenge was to integrate crafts into the platform. This was framed as a democratic issue. Craft helped ensure that this exchange was not simply reproducing the cultural elites who normally ride the carousel, but was able

⁶ For or a more developed framework for the importance of craft in a settler colonial art history, see Damian Skinner, "Settler-Colonial Art History: A Proposition in Two Parts," *Journal of Canadian History* 35, 1 (2014): 131-75.

to embrace also those in townships, slums and poblaciones.



Figure 2. Traditional Mapuche Rogativa at Santiago, Chile for South Project, 2006. Photographer unknown

The democratic framework was attempted in three ways. The first was to include where possible local indigenous welcome ceremonies alongside the inevitable meeting of dignitaries. While now a common feature of public events in Australia, it was still a relatively new component in other countries, particularly South America.



Figure 3. Māori basket making workshop, Wellington New Zealand, South Project, 2005. Photograph by Courtney Lucas

The second was to include practical workshops alongside the standard format of talks and exhibitions. Fibre crafts played a leading role, including Australian Aboriginal techniques in Johannesburg and Māori basket-making in Wellington. This offered craftspersons and artisans with a more direct benefit in attending, as well as opportunity for the university educated

participants to engage in a dialogical space was did not privilege their cultural capital.



Figure 4. Participants South Kids workshop at Mbuisa Makhubu Primary School, Soweto, 2007. Photograph by Kevin Murray

The third involved exchanges with children. The South Kids program featured the story of an emu that wanted to fly. A kit including the toy emu and camera circulated around schools in the South, enabling children to document their worlds. In Soweto, this was a pretext for praising the capacities of the ostrich, which though unable to fly has unique features such as physical beauty, useful eggs and impressive running speed. The story of the flightless bird was a predicament seen to typify the South, as a region lacking the capacity to share its unique features with each other.

In the end, the South Project did not achieve its grand ambition to establish a triennial in Melbourne. While this was partly the consequence of internal political factors, it was not helped by the relative lack of economic opportunities for Australia across the South compared to the East (Asia Pacific).

Nonetheless, the South Project left a residual network and a trail of unanswered questions. What does the South share in common, besides a shared opposition to the North? To what extent is the focus on the South reproducing a post-colonial dynamic where indigenous cultures are defined by their oppression, rather than in their own terms? What would be a space such as the South that didn't need the North to define itself against? A

kind of Hegelian dialectic had been initiated to discover an autonomous identity for the South.

Southern Theory

Meanwhile, there emerged a call in the academy to broaden the purview beyond the trans-Atlantic north. In 2007, the book by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell was published, titled *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (2007). Connell addressed the degree to which the discipline of sociology was built on a set of interests that were particular to the northern metropolitan centres. She argued that the theories of Marx, Durkheim and Weber did not account for the experiences particular to the periphery, especially that of its subaltern majorities. Rather than the universal systems offered by those theorists, Connell advocated for a 'dirty theory' that takes into account the particularities:

The goal of dirty theory is not to subsume, but to clarify; not to classify from outside, but to illuminate a situation in its concreteness. And for that purpose -- to change the metaphor -- all is grist to the mill. Our interest as researchers is to maximise the wealth of materials that are drawn into the analysis and explanation. It is also our interest to multiply, rather than slim down, the theoretical idea that we have to work with. That includes multiplying the local sources of our thinking, as this book attempts to do.⁷

While concerned particularly with the institutional production of knowledge, Connell's work paralleled others that have recently used the South within a framework of critical social theory. This includes Enrique Dussel's work constructing a discipline of liberation philosophy,⁸ which evaluates ideas according to their impact on social justice. Such a philosophy takes geopolitical space seriously. As Dussel writes, "To be born at the North Pole or in Chiapas is not the same thing as to be born in New York City."⁹ This drive has been

continued by thinkers and activists such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos, whose epic 'epistemologies of the South'¹⁰ aims to deconstruct universalising gestures.

There is much diversity among the theorists framing their work in a Southern context.¹¹ But they share the key principle of place as a valid framework for the production of knowledge. This means working in the South can be more than just a second best option, indicative of failure to succeed in the North.

Southern Theory and Visual Arts

How might Southern Theory apply to the visual arts? Within an ecological framework, ideas are evaluated not only for their internal consistency but also the greater world they make possible. We may thus look at anthropology not as the disinterested study of an exotic tribe for the production of academic knowledge elsewhere, but as an exchange involving solidarity with the aspirations of the community under scrutiny. While Southern Theory is predominantly a matter of reflecting social realities, in the case of creative practices it is more about constructing alternatives to the world as it is.

Walter D. Mignolo is one theorist who has extended the southern perspective to the practice of visual arts and design.¹² From an academic base in Hong Kong, Mignolo has led a group of scholars to develop a 'decolonial aesthetic,'¹³ which critiques Western aesthetic categories like beauty through practices of juxtaposition or parody. Mignolo highlights the Sharjah Biennial¹⁴ as an example of radical decentring. According to Mignolo, this event 'turns its back on the intellectual Euro-American fashions that have dominated, until

¹⁰ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Public Sphere and Epistemologies of the South," *Africa Development*, 37, 1 (2013): 43–67.

¹¹ Marcelo C. Rosa, "Theories of the South: Limits and Perspectives of an Emergent Movement in Social Sciences," *Current Sociology*, February 2014. Doi: 10.1177/0011392114522171.

¹² Eleni Kalantidou and Tony Fry, *Design in the Borderlands*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014).

¹³ Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez "The Decolonial AestheSis Dossier," *Social Text*, July 15, 2013: http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/the-decolonial-aestheSis-dossier/

¹⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, "Re:Emerging, Decentering and Delinking," *Ibraaz*, August 5, 2013: <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/59/>

⁷ Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (Cambridge, Malden, MA: Polity, 2007).

⁸ Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*. Vol. 1 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985)

⁹ Ibid.

recently, the “biennial market place.”¹⁵ For Mignolo, the value of Sharjah is a matter of its content; the countries and artists that participate represent an alternative ‘cultural cartography’. He notes that of the 100 artists, only two were from the USA and 20 from Europe. However, he refrains from mentioning any work in detail. The works are seen to illustrate a particular world view that is independent of the West. An example of one ‘illustrative work’ is, according to him:

... Nevin Aladag, Turkey, Session (2013). This video triptych shot in Sharjah brings together the topography of the city and percussion music composed with Arabic, African and Indian percussion instruments. The video triptych invokes the spirit of re-emergence in that it works with musical instruments that elude the European renaissance. At the same time, that the instruments are played by and in the environment of Sharjah, cultures once disavowed by western hegemony ‘re-emerge’ with the force and the confidence of pluri-versal futures.¹⁶

While its subject may seem non-Western, the format is readily assimilated into the dominant model. It is a ‘white cube’ work, detached from the world, where the visitor is an anonymous viewer. Apart from its geographic location, this work reproduces the biennial model of the world as spectacle.

The 2015 Venice Biennale curated by Okwui Enwezor brought the concerns of Sharjah to the centre. The majority of works offered a political critique of capitalist hegemony. But as noted,¹⁷ there is some irony in an event that is resourced and enjoyed by the very elites it attempts to critique. While some may argue that the carousel is opening up to the South,¹⁸ there is no guarantee that it extends beyond the strata of cultural elites found in almost all countries. The challenge is to consider platforms for art making that go beyond reflecting the world as it is, and instead offer

alternative pathways for creating a world that might be.

South Ways

It was with the aim to develop alternative platforms that a project was formed in 2014 within the Southern Perspectives,¹⁹ a network of writers and artists that continued after the South Project. The aim of South Ways was to initiate development of platforms for art that act in the world. The process involved roundtables that brought together a variety of voices from those involved in creative practice. Four roundtables were held in different cities of Australia and New Zealand reflecting a diversity of perspectives. To provide a simple pragmatic frame, the seed for each roundtable was provided by a single verb that reflected a distinctive mode of engagement found in the South.²⁰

I will provide a brief overview of these verbs and an example of their use.

To Bestow

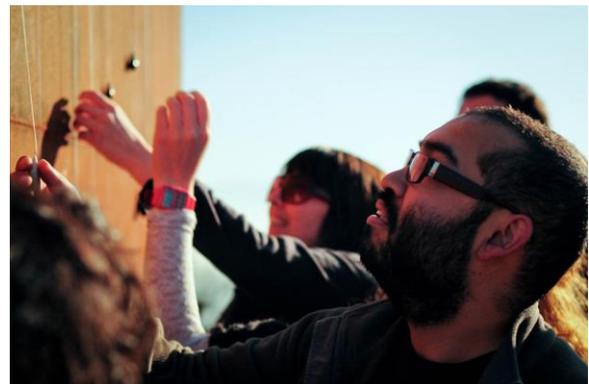


Figure 5. WALKA Studio Cornucopia: Charms for life carving cow horn, silver, silk, 2011. Photograph by Karen Clunes. Participants gather and take a pendant as an amulet charged with friendship.

¹⁹ <http://southernperspectives.net/>

²⁰ The theoretical framework for this use of verbs is Actor Network Theory, which offers a flat explanatory structure that does refuse the mimesis and instead identifies the effects that accompany representation. See: Graham Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political* (London: Pluto Press, 2014). Accordingly, the dominant verb in visual arts is ‘to explore’ or ‘to examine.’ This colonial mode entails a distance between the active world of the artist and unknowing object of knowledge. Viewed in this way, the challenge becomes identifying alternate actions in the world.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Laura Cumming, “56th Venice Biennale Review – More of a Glum Trudge than an Exhilarating Adventure,” *The Guardian*. Accessed June 14 2015: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/10/venice-biennale-2015-review-56th-sarah-lucas-xu-bing-chiharu-shiota>

¹⁸ Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, “Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global.” *Third Text* 27, 4 (2013): 442–55. Doi:10.1080/09528822.2013.810892.

The first roundtable was held in Wellington New Zealand and included a mix of Māori and Pākehā participants. The verb under consideration was ‘to bestow’ reflecting the traditional Māori practice of *koha* or gift giving in art practice and the emergence of Pākehā jewellery forms of engagement involving gift exchange. The main challenge concerned the vulnerability of such practices when exposed to consumer capitalism. Even in biennales, the “freebie” expectation means that gifts offered as part of the art world are rarely taken in the spirit of exchange. The task was to develop a platform that fostered trust and reciprocity between artists and their audiences.

The project [Joyaviva](http://joyaviva.net/)²¹ was an exhibition where artists developed prototypes of modern amulets. This drew on the South American tradition of public shrines that receive ex-votive offerings. In the exhibition format, visitors were offered plastic flowers to adorn works and encouraged to reflect on the impact of these amulets on their lives. One of the participants, the Māori artist Areta Wilkinson, integrates *koha* into both her art work and academic research. For *Joyaviva*, she featured an initiative to support a Māori community devastated by the Christchurch earthquakes, which included a Matiriki brooch symbolising the Pleiades constellation that signals the New Year.

To Open



Figure 6. Kay Abude, *Piecework*, Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2014. Photograph by Kevin Murray. The artist recreates the home factory of her childhood growing up in a South-East Asian family in Melbourne. This is one example art that reflects the verb “to open,” one of the four modalities developed in South Ways.

²¹ <http://joyaviva.net/>

Melbourne was the site of the second roundtable. Initially, the verb ‘to open’ related to the work of artists like Nicholas Mangan, who chose to expose sites of production in art galleries, such as guerrilla supply lines or factory assembly belts. Present were some of the artists who had chosen to boycott the Sydney Biennale because of its association with Transfield, the corporation commissioned to manage offshore detention centres. As befits the birthplace of Julian Assange, the Melbourne gathering advocated for a radical transparency, which would highlight the economic value that artists contribute for sponsors to major art events. The proposed WikiLeaks style of platform has yet to emerge.



Figure 7. Roundtable for Sangam Project, Delhi India, 2011. Photograph by Kevin Murray. Designers and artisans discuss how the makers of collaborative works should be credited when the products are sold.

But one initiative that does aspire to this is the Sangam Project.²² This platform emerged from the context of the practical workshops in the South Project, where North and South sometimes met in the process of product development and where designers and artisans seek to build creative partnerships. The program attempts to use the new e-commerce platforms as a means to give economic value to the information about the maker, otherwise unacknowledged. This aspires to platform that is alternative to the commodity circuits that occlude the means of production.

To Swap

In Sydney, the verb ‘swap’ was set up to reflect the phenomenon of reverse primitivism in which Southern artists turn the exotic gaze back on the

²² <http://sangamproject.net/>

North. In the end, the subject of contention again was the biennale. In this case, the issue was the way the carousel privileged the art of international relations, rather than local practices that draw on urban nature and community histories. The proposal was a distributed biennale which spread its program across local sites in different cities.



Image 8. María Gabler, *Mirador*, Galería Tajamar, Santiago de Chile, 2015. Photograph by Sebastián Mejía. This work based on the practice of "minga" involves a portable gallery extension that is transported to various sites around Chile.

An existing example is the project *Minga Sistemas de Trabajo Colectivo* in Santiago, curated by Angela Cura Mendez and Felipe Cura.²³ *Minga* is a precolombian term for collective labour. In the island of Chiloe, it often takes the form of a *Tiradura de casa* when the community gather to move someone's house to a different location. Working with the community of artist-run art spaces in Chile, this exhibition involved gathering more the spaces themselves than work within them. Maria Gabler re-constructed the walls of Galería Tajamar, which exists in a public housing estate, within Galleria Gabriela Mistral in downtown Santiago. This Minga of contemporary art enables a concentration of work that still retains its locatedness within its home community.

To Glean

The roundtable in Hobart was concerned the practice of recovering what is left over. This reflected not only the arte Povera practices such as

²³ Diego Parra Donoso, "Cuidado: Zona de Autogestión Apuntes sobre Minga en Galería Gabriela Mistral," *Revista Punto de Fuga*, 2015: <http://www.revistapuntodefuga.com/?p=1774>

El Anatsui, granted the Golden Lion in Venice for his sublime art of recycling, but also recovery of cultures lost during the process of colonisation, which was particularly dramatic in Tasmania. The discussion eventually led to the revival of the idea of a Museum of Southern Memory, initially proposed in the first South Project, reflecting the common experience of Apartheid, Stolen Generation and the Disappeared. This museum will not be a physical structure, but a network of individuals and groups that sustain a story or cultural practice through use.

In 2015, the project of a Social Repair Kit involves re-modelling traditional forms of conflict resolution through blood money. The 'sorry object' is the subject of workshops in Bogotá, Santiago and Melbourne. The focus is the injury sustained by conflicts such as the Colombian civil war, coup against Allende and the Sydney hostage siege 14-15 December 2014 and consequent islamophobia. Rather than reflect on these conflicts, the aim is to draw inspiration from traditional modes of conflict resolution, such as the Palabrereros, in order to develop objects that can be introduced into the communities to facilitate apology and pardon.²⁴

Conclusion

South Ways is a scattering of seeds, each with a kernel of action. Of course, we need to be realistic about the likelihood that these proposals will flourish, given the kind of soil in which they are planted. Stepping off the carousel means leaving behind the capital which the biennale model has proven effective in gathering. The success will depend on the strength of solidarity rather than self-interest of participants. But if South is to be more than a primitivist mirror to the North, it needs to be a space were we can test out other ways of being.

²⁴ I should also mention a more dispersed project drawing from the Melanesian language of silence to develop a platform outside of discourse. Vakanomodi project is named after the Fijian practice of deep listening to the land.