

and place. Whether that was in how we brought artists to Pittsburgh and let them spend time or showed them around or in how they taught us about their places. That is one kind of site-specificity I learned from doing the show.

TK: I don't know but for me it was my own vulnerability. If that was universal, there was something about having to dislodge ourselves from our comfort zones. Having to literally move and re-root yourself, at least for a temporary period of time, is its own challenge, I think. But there was also this expectation that the process would be shared and revealed along the way. We had to reveal it to our fellow staff, then to our community in Pittsburgh. I think that there were a lot of times when we were just really uncertain about what we were doing, and it required us to expose a vulnerability, which we built into a strength.

DBa: We could also say that we wanted to share experiences. We asked the artists to share their experiences in Pittsburgh and vice versa. Places like

Pittsburgh are literally eccentric; they allow more freedom than if you're under constant observation by a very opinionated art world. We took profit from it, and we could indeed do things that we wouldn't do in New York, but New York

like the ones you describe, Daniel; eccentric places, places outside of the center, places where artists can connect to communities, sites, conversations that they wouldn't be able to reach elsewhere. And to really spend time there. I mean, that's the thing. We brought artists on multiple trips, and I think otherwise it's pointless. Does LA need a biennial? Does New York? It's a good thing to go somewhere else on a very basic level.

TK: Don't you think this conversation we're having maybe connects to Mladen Stilinović's *In Praise of Laziness*?

DB: Yes! Laziness doesn't seem like as much of an option as it was five years ago.

TK: Well, the other thing that we should historicize in this interview is the fact that the Carnegie has all of Kamran Shirdel's films. I don't know if anyone else will ever know that. [Laughs]

obvious, but I still in that relationship I feels like such so unique. It gave it against and to

love. It gave us a collection, history.

And so I think about FRONT International or Prospect New Orleans and these other new initiatives in the US that don't necessarily have that, and I wonder about the effect that has.

DB: Are you still going to biennials?

TK: I want to go to them. I'm more excited about going to biennials than anything.

DB: More than art fairs? [Laughs]

TK: Yeah. I'm not gonna lie.

—
Dan Byers is the John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Director of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University.

Tina Kukielski is executive director and chief curator of Art21.

Daniel Baumann is director/curator of Kunsthalle Zürich.

TEARING OFF THE LABELS

David J. Getsy and Yan Xing

DG: One of the distinguishing elements of FRONT International is the relationship between, on the one hand, the local exigencies of Cleveland as a site, and on the other, the network of global contemporary artists and institutions that are participating. You're an artist who works between two very different art worlds, centered in Beijing and Los Angeles, and I wanted to start by asking about your experience of navigating the global and the local. More directly, you once said to me that you didn't experience a conflict between these two registers. How do you translate work that makes sense coming from Beijing but speaks to an art world with different values and expectations?

Michael Rakowitz, *A Color Removed*, 2018.
Installation view at FRONT Porch

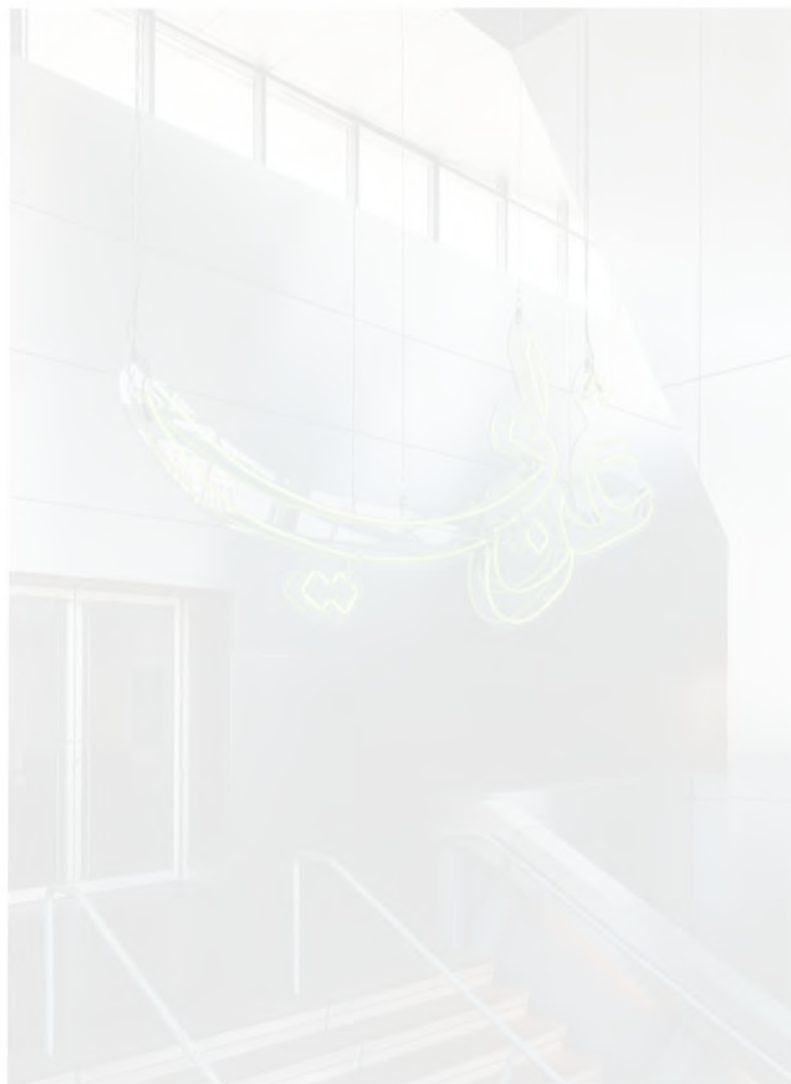


YX: This problem has bothered me for a long time. My mother is a struggling fashion designer. So when I grew up, I was always surrounded by aesthetic consciousness. She would buy all kinds of Western journals and books, which duly influenced me. She is also a woman full of fantasies about the West, so everything in our home was imported—from the washing machine, refrigerator, and television down to skin lotions, ointments, and such. She really is what was then called “besotted with Westernization,” even though she doesn’t speak a word of English. So she also was fooled. Once, for instance, she bought a so-called imported shampoo, and discovered as soon as she tore off the label that it was actually a Chinese product. My youth was passed in a make-believe Western fairytale world that my mother created for me. My artistic enlightenment began in middle school. I remember when I came across Chinese classical paintings for the first time. I was perfectly aware that they were supposed to represent my “native culture,” but actually my frame of reference is completely the art of the so-called West. I feel much more inspired by Velázquez than by Bada Shanren. I continue to feel tremendously embarrassed by this emotional inability to connect with my “native culture.” In 2014 I immigrated to the United States. This change in my individual life circumstances certainly brought a great challenge. For instance, it forced me for the first time to face my “native-language system”—whether that is “Chinese people,” “Chineseness,” the Chinese language, or all that talk about an unfolding “Chinese contemporary art” (or contemporary art with “Chinese” characteristics); this weaned me from my earlier framework of thinking—for I had never paid any attention to these things before leaving China. I certainly don’t think I have now resolved these problems (if indeed they are problems). I think I have always steadfastly refused to be pushed into a “Chinese corner” in my own artistic practice. The artistic language of my work engages in a complex interplay with the native languages of many different places, such as Italy, Russia, and the Netherlands; my research on the Caucasus is still in progress. In other words, when confronted with “globalization,” I don’t pretend to be shocked, or critical, or accepting. Perhaps I don’t feel it so unnatural to be an “Other” or a “non-native speaker.” So, perhaps I am not feeling especially excited about being a “minority,” but I don’t feel belittled by it either.

DG: That backstory is very helpful, and it helps bring into relief some of the assumptions that underwrite conversations about the global. There is a kind of quick categorization of artists according to which geographies and cultures they are seen to represent, and institutions use them to stand in for those cultures as a means of demonstrating their own openness and inclusivity. It’s a tokenistic logic—one that (especially in American institutions) is an elision of anxieties about race. Such categorization collapses race and culture as a means of avoiding the implicit whiteness that is the unmarked ground against which those of other cultures or races are “marked.” But one of the things that I love about your work is how you tackle such questions directly. You use fiction, deception, and insincerity in tactical ways to expose the ways in which both people and institutions attempt to categorize. You do this both at the level of individual desire (as with *Dangerous Afternoon*, 2017) and institutional discourse (as with *Why are we going to Brunei?*, 2015). In both, there is an active fictionalization that plays out some of the issues of doubleness (and duplicity). Is this approach

in your work part of your response to feeling doubled or out of sync in your “native culture”?

YX: In the Trump era we are more firmly aware that our democracy has problems, even as we retain a natural confidence in the moral justice of democracy. Our deep-rooted cultural institutions have operated on the basis of this kind of self-righteous leftist thinking for many years, leaving no room for us to examine consciously many of our deeply held beliefs, such as the “openness” and “inclusivity” you mentioned. I am a Chinese artist who was born and educated in China before immigrating to the United States at the age of twenty-seven. So, the concepts that I believe in or don’t believe in all come from China. In particular, there are concepts that I have opposed since elementary school: for example, my opposition to non-democracy and to censorship. But after I came to America, these old problems did not go away. If anything, they became more profound to me. In the United States, the overwhelming majority of Chinese artists have been molded into a “minority” category. Whether they eulogize ancient Chinese culture (in



Nasser al-Salem, *Arabi/Gharbi* (Arab/Foreigner), 2016. Installation view at Akron Art Museum



order to provide a globalized version of Orientalism) or criticize the systemic problems of the Chinese government (in order to use the global southern democracy movement to affirm Western democratic systems and rationality), I feel a strong sense of antipathy. My artworks are not complete fabrications, but if fiction can offer a greater critique, if fiction can provide more details than reality—well, in fact I think that the self-righteous reality is itself a kind of choice. There is no “Eye of God” that exposes what is false. A truly authentic reality is necessarily a kind of illusion. I am an artist of the middle road, and I do not feel that my views on many issues are necessarily righteous. I do not firmly believe in my judgments. For an artist from China like me, it is in fact this sort of righteousness that I have most opposed since childhood. One thing I have learned from history is that righteous attitudes, no matter how firmly grounded in morality, can easily lead to bigotry and insanity. Similarly, I do not feel that “native culture” is such an important and necessary motif. Identity politics obtained a reasonable status in the art practices of the previous era, but it also caused a lot of problems. I believe that an artist’s work is really about the language of art. Of course, at present, such utterances are easily interpreted as political

incorrectness. Perhaps what this era requires is art that simply provides illustrations to accompany the news.

DG: Your work often incites misreadings and misunderstandings precisely because you refuse to fall into that righteousness that accompanies so much art today (whether overtly political or just implicitly so). Your critiques of such things as Orientalism aren’t the standard self-satisfied positions. This is what makes them so unnerving to many. It also allows you to sidestep the standard identity politics clichés as well as knee-jerk attempts to see you as representative of a race or a culture. But there’s still critique in your practice, and that’s important. It’s just suspended in a web of contested ethical boundaries and fictionalized sincerities. Your stance is also conceptually grounded in a queer relation to identity as a supposedly stable category. I always think of your works as trying to produce a kind of conceptual and ethical disorientation. Through that disorientation and its negotiations, you resist the idea of the righteous and, even more, the singularly “correct” or “true.” Your works do take stands, but they’re ones achieved through triangulation and negotiation between participants.

But now I want to ask a question that might seem a bit contradictory

based on our conversation, and that is to pursue one way in which your practice relates to the different ways in which Chinese culture deals with things like copyright or intellectual property. You seem to embody the role of the sly trickster who demonstrates intelligence by fooling others. As I understand it, this is a valued position. It affects Chinese cultural attitudes toward originality in ways that chafe against, say, the rhetoric of individualism and proprietary ownership that American culture vaunts. I know it is reductive to simplify all this into this kind of a polarity, but I’ve always been interested in how you seem to use fiction and appropriation in ways that infiltrate and unsettle the comfortable presumptions of the American or European institutions that show your work. This might be one way in which to talk about how you achieve a productive friction between your post-émigré work and an art world whose language is based on things you oppose, such as too-easy categorizations or righteous exclusions.

YX: This is truly an extremely difficult question to answer. Essentially, I am not opposed to the authoritativeness—or, in other words, the normativity—of American and European organizations. I do not believe that the sole function of art is to oppose or challenge certain mechanisms, because throughout art

history, many excellent art languages have flourished in authoritative environments. I also do not believe that moral correctness determines the value of art. After all, it is an extremely professionalized field that has yet to fall into the clutches of any political standpoint, correct or incorrect. On the surface, my artworks do not seem very radical, or at least they can be viewed as not provocative.

In fact, we already discussed how opposing authority as a Chinese-born artist is in fact an extremely safe mode of production in the present ideological context. The reason I don't do that is because I hate doing work predicated on China for a so-called world stage. I have not situated my work in some profound cultural setting, which may be related to my itinerant lifestyle of the past ten years. So I also am opposed to being understood as a "Chinese artist living in America." In fact, I have not provided a critique of core American values, and when it comes to art that takes the United States as its mother tongue, I see myself as an onlooker. I am highly focused on creating a mode of work that escapes from the mother-tongue system. For example, as we speak, I am in Lithuania, working in an environment that includes Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, and German languages. But that does not imply that I want to challenge this system. I am not so naïve as to think that the interventions of a Chinese artist can shake this system. I am a big fan of some of the words you use, like "infiltrate" and "settle." I am not attempting to overthrow anything

with the assumption that justice is on my side.

DG: While it's comforting to many to demand simplistic political stances and messages from art, that's rarely an adequate accounting or even a useful intervention. It's harder to get to the messy boundaries and ethical quandaries that are part of politics. Especially when artists are used as tokens in the "mother-tongue system," the result is to block off productive discourse or practical ways of enacting change. It all just ends up reiterating the existing system and its hierarchies. What I love about your work is that you revel in proposing duplicity, and you leave unsettled questions of correctness (both in terms of truth and in terms of how to act). This is difficult, since it means that your work is easily misconstrued or seen only partially. But I would venture to say that you accept this possibility in favor of the slow reveal that what appears to be one thing (or one voice) ends up being more complex (and polyvocal). It's an antidote to the hypothesis-driven art that often claims to illustrate "politics." You leave us in a state of productive uncertainty and demand that we arbitrate the meanings against others' interpretations. Fiction and duplicity, in this practice, aren't tricks or covers but rather opportunities to demonstrate how meanings are relational and beliefs are contingent. (And in this I would connect your practice to that of others, such as Simon Fujiwara, Hito Steyerl, Shahryar Nashat, or perhaps Adam Pendleton.) It's exactly

this kind of layered complexity that gets lost when people are reduced to positions and when contemporary art is predicated on a kind of record-keeping by national identity.

David J. Getsy is the Goldabelle McComb Finn Distinguished Professor of Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Yan Xing is an artist who reflects critically on how history is manufactured today.

ON REGIONALITY Terry Schwarz and Charles Waldheim

TS: Regionality, like nationality, is a cultural construct. There is a pronounced identity, along with important responsibilities, that come with being a citizen of the Great Lakes region. Conceptualizing this area as a "third coast," as you did in your recent book, *Third Coast Atlas*, provides a useful way of looking at regionality. It puts the Midwest on equal footing with the other two coasts and recognizes the distinct cultural, ecological, and economic resources of what is sometimes perceived of as fly-over country.

CW: If you ask people what is "The Midwest," you'll get a wide range of responses. The definition is part of the problem. The term was made by people who are not in the region. The Third Coast is a way of claiming our own identity through language. But first we need to unpack the idea of "region." The category has been abused and overused. It has become exhausted. But what other terms do we have when referring to an area bigger than a city but smaller than a country?

The word "region" is related to "reign." It refers to territory but also to authority. Region is not a benign term. Embedded in a region are questions about who and what should be here. What is appropriate by virtue of its nativeness? Who speaks for this place, and by what moral authority? Regions come with boundaries and barriers. Politics and infrastructure sometimes align with geological terrain. In my own field—landscape architecture—there is a lamentation that we don't often organize ourselves politically along geologic lines.



Odili Donald Odita, *Constellation*, 2018.
Design proposal for mural

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Eleven
Cultural
Exercises

**FRONT
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CLEVELAND
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ART**

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