

## Introduction

What does globalisation look like?

This question has of course often been tackled head-on. Globalisation has its own set of privileged visual markers. Planes and open skies, flags and maps, hotel lounges and conference rooms, visibly bicultural handshakes—these and other motifs have regularly been used to signify global exchange and transcultural expertise in advertisements for multinational businesses. Euro banknotes signal the principles of political and economic integration through images of bridges and archways. And artists have at times resorted to a similar repertoire of signs in their own attempts to describe the mechanisms and effects of globalisation. Jules de Balincourt has painted a globe covered with brightly coloured patches connected by looping lines in a clear reference to air traffic, which presumably stands for burgeoning international trade and communications as well as travel (*Big Globe Painting*, 2012). In a video commissioned for the 2012 London Olympics, Kimsooja has shown the flags of the participating nations, each dissolving into the next, in a forty-minute sequence that implicitly affirms the benefits of travel and exchange (*To Breathe—The Flags*, 2012). Nic Hess has combined the logos of well-known corporations with references to modern transport and communications in large installations that point to the growing economic interdependence of different states and regions. Like the advertisements and euro notes, these projects show some confidence in their off-the-peg metaphors as effective ciphers for the processes of globalisation, but the very familiarity of those metaphors should give us pause. Is that confidence warranted—and what exactly do those signs call to mind?



Nic Hess,  
*Untitled*, 2001

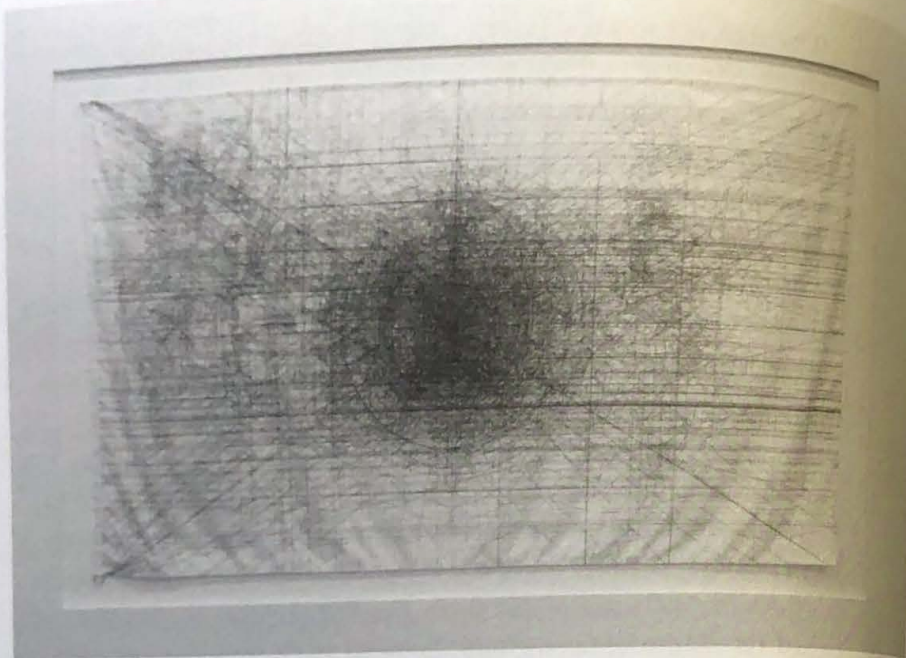
The globes, flags, and logos seem to announce an engagement with the processes of globalisation, as if those processes were easily circumscribed and transparently called forth in the various images. Are they?

Possibly not. Indeed, those images that query their own viability as representations of global exchange are more compelling by far. Patricia Reed is another artist who gestures towards globalisation through the use of flags, but her *Pan-National Flag* (2009) is remarkable for the anxiety it shows around its own legibility as a commentary on globalisation or, if you prefer, around globalisation as a phenomenon that lends itself to visual transcription and analysis. A digital print on flag fabric, it reduces the flags of all internationally recognised states to thin black outlines and superimposes them to create a single flag-image. But this flag is colourless and hence drained of conviction as a sign of allegiance, the absence of colour hinting at the ebbing of national sovereignty at a time of heightened international exchange. If the cursive dynamism of de Balincourt's *Big Globe Painting* and the stately morphing of Kimsooja's flags can be read as signalling optimism at new patterns of exchange and hybrid new identities, Reed's scratchy, monochromatic composition strikes a more uncertain note.

The densely meshed lines obscure the flags even as they register them, the work seemingly describing not the coexistence of sovereign nations but a vast and complex network. We might read that network as a transport grid, corporate structure, or communications web; that is to say, we are liable to view the work as describing a system that potentially exceeds the reach of the nation state. And that system apparently becomes denser towards the centre, where the lines form knots so thick that all sense of coordination—of a larger pattern—dissolves, leaving just a tangled web. Is this what the processes of globalisation look like? If so, they are on one level opaque. Reed's work recalls the infographics that have proliferated in newspapers, magazines, scholarly publications, and business reports, but while these are designed to communicate complex data in easily assessable form, her flag sketches the breakdown of its diagrammatic idiom. It seems to suggest not just that the imagery of nation is unsuited to capturing the changes that have come in the wake of globalisation but also that those changes may turn out to be describable only in terms that are not amenable to visual resolution.

One of the assumptions underlying this book is that globalisation is not simply available for representation. In their dispersal and immense complexity, global processes create significant new hurdles for artists and others who wish to describe them, as Fredric Jameson and more recently T.J. Demos have pointed out.<sup>1</sup> Efforts to capture those processes

<sup>1</sup> See Fredric Jameson, "Introduction: Beyond Landscape," in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1–5; and T.J. Demos, "Another World, and Another ... Notes on Uneven Geographies," in *Uneven Geographies* (Nottingham: Nottingham Contemporary, 2010), online catalogue, <http://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/art/uneven-geographies>.



Patricia Reed, *Pan-National Flag*, 2009

Introduction

may fail, they may turn out to be partial or illegible, they may highlight the limitations of their own signifying systems. These risks are readable in Reed's *Pan-National Flag*.

This problem of visibility is aggravated by another factor. Cybernetic communications are crucial to the functioning of global networks but largely elude visual capture. To the extent that Reed's work can be viewed as mapping virtual data flows, it hints at both the "pan-national" character of such flows and their invisibility. And this impediment to the representation of the processes of globalisation is compounded by another, more insidious obstacle: we frequently take current patterns of global exchange for granted. We are inured to them. Many of the phenomena discussed in the chapters of this book, from the rise of budget travel to the power and reach of the global city, are familiar—so familiar that we are prone to overlooking or downplaying their larger implications.<sup>2</sup> The generation that once got by without mobile phones is ageing and with it are fading memories of an era before Wi-Fi and social media, before the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the Uruguay Round of the world trade talks (completed in 1994), before the rise of new nomadic elites and the appearance of retail giants in shopping malls around the world. Younger generations, accustomed to contemporary mobilities and modes of connection, are less attuned to their historical specificity.

<sup>2</sup> The argument that Pamela M. Lee advances in her book on globalisation and the art world is a variation on this theme. She maintains that the art world has naturalised its transformation into a global network and so "approaches the state of its historical forgetting." For Lee, artists of today unavoidably struggle to gain critical purchase on the processes of globalisation as the distance between their own professional sphere—their own methods of production and distribution—and the global economy has collapsed. See Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 5.

Globalisation also flickers in and out of focus as an issue in the news media. Some aspects are considered newsworthy—at the time of writing, these would include the refugee crisis in Europe and Islamic State's success in recruiting fighters from the rich world. But many more are not; the refugee crises in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, for instance, receive scant attention from the news media in the West, while long-running tragedies, such as the conflicts fuelled by resource extraction in parts of Africa, and systemic issues, like the social costs of delocalisation, are widely glossed over.<sup>3</sup>

We run the risk of treating the processes of globalisation as simple givens, as part of the furniture of our modernity, and hence of failing to come to grips with forces that, for good and ill, powerfully affect our lives. This study aims to highlight those artistic projects that have worked against the tendencies to view forms of global exchange as unknowable-in-visual-form and already-known, focusing on works that offer a renewed engagement with globalisation, that is to say, a commitment to opening processes of globalisation to artistic inquiry, to defamiliarising them, to making them visible, analysable, and contestable. And something of the urgency of that task is discernible in Reed's *Pan-National Flag*.

Crucially, Reed's work is not wholly illegible. As the flags multiply, merge, and disappear, the composition seems to

<sup>3</sup> For compelling critiques of media responses to transnational crises, see inter alia, T.J. Demos, "The Haunting: Renzo Martens's *Enjoy Poverty*," in *Return to Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 97–124; and Alex Farquharson, foreword to *Uneven Geographies*.

offer glimpses of circuits and networks, of multiple, overlapping patterns of exchange, and hence of other ways of imagining the processes of globalisation. As Reed well appreciates, overcoming the obstacles to the representation of global exchange is at once a critical undertaking and one that calls for new conceptual categories and new formal and metaphorical resources.

This book examines those categories and resources as they have been honed in the art of the last twenty-five years or so.<sup>4</sup> It leaves other, related projects to other writers. It is not, for instance, intended as an account of the globalisation of the art world, although this is a crucial area of study: the integration of local art networks into larger, global circuits has obviously had profound repercussions. We need to reach a better understanding of a range of art-world developments, including the proliferation of art fairs and biennials, the opening of many art colleges to international students, the peripatetic ways of prominent curators, the emergence of international museum franchises, and the growing number of multinational galleries. Good work has already been done on these trends, particularly on the rise of the biennial, which has exercised many commentators over the last fifteen years or so.

<sup>4</sup> My cut-off point is 1989 and in this I am following Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel, who in their study of art and globalisation present the year as a turning point, pointing out that it witnessed such crucial events as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the inception of the World Wide Web, the Tiananmen Square massacre, the publication of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History?*, and crucial early curatorial projects aimed at integrating non-Western tendencies into the compass of contemporary art, such as "The Other Story" at the Hayward Gallery in London and above all "Magiciens de la terre" at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. See "Timeline 1989," in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, ed. Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 58–59.

The most valuable studies tend to stress that the globalisation of the art world is not uniform in its effects; different institutions and local configurations insert themselves into larger networks on different terms.<sup>5</sup> But despite the rash of recent books and articles on these processes, some questions have been widely neglected. The roles of art colleges and residency programmes in creating informal cross-cultural networks, for instance, deserve closer examination. My focus, however, is on art practices, not on infrastructural arrangements. Of course those arrangements intrude at times on my analyses as many artists have reflected on global exchange by attending specifically to art-world mechanisms and institutions that have been transformed by global pressures. Their reflections play a central part in chapter 7 and the epilogue.

This book is not an account of the globalisation of the art world. Nor does it propose to elucidate the processes of globalisation with the help of artworks. The works that feature here are not presented as “illustrating” forms of global exchange. Rather, successive chapters consider artworks alongside polemical perspectives on (particularly thorny dimensions of) globalisation on the understanding that the two may prove mutually illuminating. Artworks are not assessed on their rightness as vehicles for the communication of the hard facts of globalisation but on their ability to present forms of global exchange within new conceptual and affective parameters, to articulate the ideological stakes in their functioning and representation, and to draw out the tensions

<sup>5</sup> One good example is Anne Ring Petersen, “Identity Politics, Institutional Multiculturalism, and the Global Artworld,” *Third Text* 26, no. 2 (March 2012): 195–204.

and contradictions that lurk in familiar discourses around them. Sarat Maharaj has written suggestively on the differences between empirical research and artistic knowledge production, arguing that the second, which he terms “thinking through the visual,” tends not to follow a rigorous process but to improvise a method as it goes along. As Maharaj has it, thinking through the visual may set its own terms of reference adrift, it may rely on modes of thought and feeling that are incommensurate with verbal expression, it may set multiple elements side by side rather than organising them in causal chains.<sup>6</sup> And this is true of the projects that are considered in this book. Many of the artists who engage with processes of globalisation are as concerned with conceivable locations and mobilities as with observable ones, as keen to experiment with hypothetical situations and identities as to hold to established ones. Their works rarely serve simply to corroborate (or dispute) the findings of other commentators; rather, they have supplemented those findings, they have expanded on their implications, they have personalised them and retold them in narrative form, they have rehearsed them in ironic and other keys or tessellated them with other perspectives.

My objective here is not to discuss artworks in relation to a fixed conception of global exchange, which they may or may not adequately reflect, but to highlight new forms of thinking through the visual that have emerged from artworks examining global processes. Or, to make the same point in different terms, my work here is impelled by the conviction

<sup>6</sup> Sarat Maharaj, “Know-How and No-How: Stopgap Notes on ‘Method’ in Visual Art as Knowledge Production,” *Art and Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2009), <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/maharaj.html>.

that artists can and have made powerful—and powerfully distinctive—contributions to debates around globalisation.

The chapters that follow approach the topic of global exchange from a variety of different perspectives, each grounded in a specific problem or question, but they are all underpinned by the same predispositions. While I am not in agreement with the defenders of globalisation, with advocates of economic deregulation and borderless trade, my thinking here is informed by a broad enthusiasm for other modes of exchange, hybridisation, and transnational allegiance. I dwell throughout on artistic projects that envision forms of cross-border contact built on curiosity and the taste or need for collaboration; these projects do not express opposition to global exchange per se but to globalisation-as-we-know-it, to the spread and intensification of capitalist processes of accumulation. Chapter 2, for instance, takes a close look at pieces that rehabilitate the tourist, presenting him or her not as the foolish figure of lore but as expressing a wish for contact that has powerful political resonances. And in chapter 4 the translator's work stands in for the affirmative élan that is detectable in the first approach to an as-yet-opaque text or culture. Artists, I argue, are well placed to advance alternative modes of global exchange; as Maharaj indicated, the uncovering of latencies is proper to thinking through the visual. But their visions do not function just as models for the progressive rethinking of the processes of globalisation—they also implicitly or explicitly serve as critical commentaries on current modalities of global exchange. Certainly, the human and planetary costs of those modalities haunt many of the works that are discussed in these pages. Some of those costs,

such as the violence arising from global competition for scarce resources and the social dislocations that attend the shifting of production from one location to another, have already been mentioned. Others, including mounting inequalities within and between regions and accelerating environmental destruction, are brought up in later chapters in connection with specific artistic projects.

The flip side to probing alternative models of global exchange is a wariness towards localism. Many in the antiglobalisation movement see local ways, enterprises, and communities both as the entities most immediately threatened by globalisation and as the first line of resistance to it. That is a position taken up by many artists, but it is viewed with scepticism here. For one thing, localist expressions may take on exclusionary accents—they may present given locations as belonging more securely to some than to others. Upholding the local may involve simplifying or sanitising it, presenting it in essentialising terms as more homogenous than it is.<sup>7</sup> For another, projects premised on the value of the local are often both motivated by global forces and averse to their representation. Ventures foregrounding the virtues of the local, from “buy local” campaigns to regionalist traditions of landscape painting, tend to present local configurations as self-contained and hence to turn away from the very processes that underlie their advocacy. What these ventures fail to recognise, as I contend in the final two chapters, is that the local is always already shaped in part by global cross-currents. To describe the local

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent discussion of the risks that attend projects seeking to celebrate local communities, see Miwon Kwon, “The (Un)Sittings of Community,” in *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 138–55.