

Mutualizing Knowledge,  
Bridging Differences,  
Sharing Resources

On Collaborative  
Production conducted  
by Réseau Cinema



Lotte Arndt

To conceive of an anti-museum does not mean to recreate an institution, but a space of radical hospitality.

—Achille Mbembe<sup>1</sup>

Many of us working in public art institutions, or art schools, are exposed to the corrosive effects of public austerity policies, growing elitism and competition between and within art or educational structures. Very often, the first consequence of these combined forces is the unraveling of solidarity and the resurgence of an attitude that aims for individualistic distinction through competition with others. In this general situation, Réseau Cinema (Network Cinema) was founded in order to develop strategies to collaborate, self-organize, and elaborate new ways of working, and rather than rely on pre-existing structures, to open up the existing institutional frameworks for more exchange, instead of competing for the best share of scarce resources, as neoclassical economic practice wants us to. Most of the art schools involved in Réseau Cinema do not have access to important extra funding for the artistic research that they are meant to develop. Instead of working increasingly under conditions of austerity and competition for the fewer remaining financial support streams, an ever-growing workload and more obligations, exams and quick outputs that the ministerial guidelines prescribe, the participating lecturers and students have decided to mutualize their knowledge and resources. Réseau Cinema outlines an inter-school research structure with the aim to foster circulation and exchange between the schools, and that allows us to collaborate. The challenges are both structural and content-related. We wonder whether it is possible to transform isolated and sometimes financially weak institutional situations into locations of exchange, productive conflict, and reciprocity, allowing for the circulation of students and lecturers.

<sup>1</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016), quote translated from French by Lotte Arndt.

## A BRIEF HISTORY

Réseau Cinema is a collaborative structure of students and lecturers in half a dozen art schools in France, who are collectively developing an inter-school research structure.<sup>2</sup> Based on existing affinities between artists and writers teaching in the different schools involved, the work is based on a shared understanding of cinema as a mode of thinking and working rather than being a specific medium. The network aspires to take into account the bold presence of film in art schools and as a result hopes to allow for a stronger exchange and reflection on its relation to narrative and writing, modes of editing, and expanded forms of cinema beyond the screen. While lens-based practices and moving image are important components, and the idea of working on a collective film was the starting point, the research methodology and practice have evolved considerably since the start. Performance, photography, painting, and installation are just as much part of the student's works as film in a more classical understanding, as a specific medium. This ability to adapt to the variety of practices is at the heart of the understanding of artistic research that Réseau Cinema pursues: porous, relational, highly sensitive to context and to the students' projects, while avoiding the simple juxtaposition of singular, but separate practices. According to this idea, the network evolved significantly over the last couple of years in terms of both content and shape.

A first comprehensive encounter with nine art schools took place in 2015 through an initial event, titled *Ghostdance*, at Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, an art center located in a communist suburb in the Northeast of Paris. It was structured around the question of transmission, of the unconscious, of the irrepressible, and relied on the figure of the ghost as considered in Ken McMullen's homonymous film with Jacques Derrida (1983). Beyond the content, the conference reflected on its scenography and its occurrence as a filmed event. Rather than define a fixed program, this first encounter led to the formulation of open questions and an invitation to the participating artists and schools to join the conversation.

Very soon, two central queries became part of the exchanges that laid the foundations for the network in its early stages. First, if cinema has historically been involved in colonialism, to what extent can it be thought and practiced against this mode of capture, classification and control?<sup>3</sup> Second, beyond the topics and specificity of images, how do we have to rethink our own modes of organization and collaboration, and the ways they shape our practice

and reflection on it, if we want to allow for horizontal, feminist, and responsible production modes to emerge?

The encounter in March 2016 gave us the opportunity to elaborate further on these questions. It took place under the title *Figures of Absence. What is an Empty Space?*, in the context of the exhibition *Made in Algeria. Genealogies of a Territory* at MUCEM, Marseille. The exhibition was curated by Zahia Rahmani and Jean-Yves Sarazin, and devoted to cartography and its development, for which the French conquest and expansion into Algeria was the driving force, but that also allowed the colonial projection of the territory. The blank spaces on maps played a major role in the invention and cultural orientation of the Algerian territory.<sup>4</sup> The workshop explored the manners in which cinema, cartography, and painting have been complicit in, but also potentially resistant to the colonial enterprise. Imagining a 'white space,' an empty space, a *terra nullius*, already implies the colonial assumption of the absence of negotiation, of the possibility of total control. This gesture ignores the presence of local agents that would have to be taken into account. But the realities of the cartographic projection are much more complex: "The maps produced by the army in the XIXth century show a territory of conquest, rather than a conquered territory, but also allow to understand the difficulties to represent and master entirely the colonial territory. Cartography, reflection and instrument of colonial domination, has to negotiate its proceedings, and adapt to local conditions."<sup>5</sup> The contributions to the workshop followed the idea of complicating the relation to projection as a fundamental cinematographic proceeding through the introduction of so-called "epistemic obstacles": Hassen Ferhani's film *Dans ma tête un rondpoint* (2015) focuses on

3 This entanglement has largely been described and analyzed in recent decades. With the students, we discussed, among others: Wolfram Hartmann, Jeremy Silvester, Patricia Hayes (eds.) *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History* (Cape Town: Juta and Company Ltd, 1999); and Emma Wolukau Wanambwa's project *Narratives of La croisière noire*, available online at [http://villavassilieff.net/IMG/pdf/fnagp\\_2\\_riso-pl.compressed.pdf](http://villavassilieff.net/IMG/pdf/fnagp_2_riso-pl.compressed.pdf) (accessed August 1, 2018), in which she examines the conditions of colonial image production in the frame of a promotion journey undertaken by Citroen and Louis Vuitton.

4 *Made in Algeria. Généalogie d'un territoire*, available online at <http://www.mucem.org/en/made-algeria> (accessed August 1, 2018).

5 Hélène Blais, "La carte et le territoire colonial," in Zahia Rahmani, Jean-Yves Sarazin (eds.) *Made in Algeria. Généalogie d'un territoire* (Vanves: Hazan, 2016) p. 77.



fig 1

fig 1 Dae inum ipsum hil et quietem que nonsequas dolo quossitae pratemet que pernatem rem etur? Odi commolu ptaernatur magnit, solorporum untis sunt fugiti omnis reseque possimp oreptatus evelicium repuda verumqui officii commisi ommissita velectur?

working conditions in an Algerian slaughterhouse. The writer Zahia Rahmani's lecture "L'Indienne enroulée dans le cinéma de John Ford, ou les chemins d'un malentendu" (The Indian enrolled in the cinema of John Ford, or the roads of a misunderstanding), interrogated the ghostly presence of Native American techniques, notably weaving, in John Ford's cinema. Habiba Djahnine, filmmaker and director of the Béjaia Doc studios, Algeria, confronted the empty spaces of the colonial cartography with the commemorations of the assassination of her sister in Algeria's civil war. And Jean-Pierre Rehm, director of FIDMarseille, presented Pere Portabellas's straying camera in Garcia Lorca's house, while the furniture is progressively moved out, leaving the rooms empty.

The connection between cinematographic and colonial projection continued to draw our attention when we began to formulate the future project, in discussion with the works that the students had developed during the workshop in Marseille. In 2016 we started the first two-year program that gained financial support from the French Ministry of Culture; we received a modest amount that gave the necessary context and recognition for a collective experimental process. The project started with the idea to work on a collaborative film that would contest the classifying logics of ethnographic and natural history museums.<sup>6</sup> For this, we could count on the work of artists and curators who explored modes of transformation of museums, and who interrogated the possibilities of restitution. Building on her experiences as the director of the Weltkulturen Museum Frankfurt, Clémentine Deliss proposes to investigate the "potential for a laboratory or workshop within the museum. As a physical and epistemological venue of collaborative intensity, it confronts the stubbornness of material objects and organizes these within new, dialogical assemblages that have the capacity to produce alternative narratives. Here, the museum becomes the region and the collection the practice."<sup>7</sup> Challenging the ethnographic museum is, as Deliss

6 To name but a few works that discuss and transform these classifications by commenting the museum displays, one can think of Lothar Baumgarten's classical work *Unsettled Objects* (1968-1969), or more recently Pauline M'bareks extensive work on ethnographic museums, or Judy Radul's *Look. Look Away. Look Back* (2014). See also Mathieu K. Abonnenc, Lotte Arndt, Catalina Lozano *Crawling Doubles. Colonial Collecting and Affect* (Paris: B42, 2016).

7 Clémentine Deliss, "Occupy Collections!", available online at [http://www.documenta14.de/en/south/456 Occupy\\_collections\\_clementine\\_deliss\\_in\\_conversation\\_with\\_frederic\\_keck\\_on\\_access\\_circulation\\_and\\_interdisciplinary\\_experimentation\\_or\\_the\\_urgency\\_of\\_remediating\\_ethnographic\\_collections\\_before\\_it\\_is\\_really\\_too\\_late](http://www.documenta14.de/en/south/456 Occupy_collections_clementine_deliss_in_conversation_with_frederic_keck_on_access_circulation_and_interdisciplinary_experimentation_or_the_urgency_of_remediating_ethnographic_collections_before_it_is_really_too_late) (accessed August 1, 2018).

writes pertinently, a necessity in order to adjust it to the layered and multiply connected societies in which we live today, and this implies giving up the authority of the institutions in the global North to possess, show, and give meaning to the objects they hold.

For this purpose, the contributors of Réseau Cinema searched for artistic strategies to subvert, and maybe overcome the fixations created by the subjugation, classification, and colonization of people and territories of which the ethnographic museum and film have historically been tools. The hypothesis was that cinematographic modes of editing, as a highly dynamic mode of thinking, allowing for fragmentation, and coexistence of heterogeneous time and space, can contribute to reshaping our modes of collaboration in order to favor kinship and reciprocity. Quickly, Achille Mbembe's idea of an anti-museum—developed in his book *Politics of Inimicity* (2016)—became the guiding principle for the two-year research. Mbembe proposes to think about the anti-museum not as another institution, but as a space of radical hospitality. Interrogating the museum is thus thought of as a means to reshape collections and displays in relation to contemporary society. The museum is not the final aim of the process, but a means to rearrange social relations through their modes of representation, an idea that is strongly present in artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh's work. Here I refer to her film *La Javanaise* (2012) with the acting participation of Dr. David Dibosa, in which the camera tries to capture the character of the Black visitor in the former colonial institute in Amsterdam, while he keeps subtracting himself from the image and forces the eye of the camera to search anew. They refer to this mode of filming as “fugitive directing.”<sup>8</sup> Here, the conscious movement of the gaze's object turns the logic of control around: while still out of frame, the filming subject becomes visible through its (often hasty) reactions—the framer is framed.<sup>9</sup>

8 Wendelien van Oldenborgh and Emilie Pethick (eds.), *Amateur* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

9 See also on this topic: Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992).

10 Susan Goldberg, “For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist. To Rise Above Our Past, We Must Acknowledge It,” *The Race Issue*, *National Geographic*, April 2018, available online at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/04/from-the-editor-race-racism-history/> (accessed August 1, 2018).

11 Margit Berner, Anette Hoffmann, Britta Lange, *Sensible Sammlungen. Aus dem anthropologischen Depot* (Hamburg: Philo & Philo Fine Arts, 2011).

12 Benoît de l'Estoile, *Le goût des autres. De l'exposition coloniale aux arts premiers* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007).

From here on, we worked on a double structure: we organized collective museum visits, screenings, and workshops, which allowed us to work as a multi-sited group—giving us the time to discover affinities and to develop common languages—beyond the different locations of the schools—and created shared enquiries that could travel and take shape when back in the different cities. In addition there was the participation of lecturers and students in workshops proposed by individual schools, and site-specific work, the content of which was subsequently shared via an online platform. The specific occurrences in every single city were thus articulated with an understanding of the structuring presence of the colonial throughout the French territory, and in the present.

*Museum Reverse*, a visit with commentary to two of the mayor museums in Paris—Musée de l'Homme and Musée du Quai Branly—and a lecture at Villa Vassiliev on *Disquiet presences* were our collective start. Musée de l'Homme, the former ethnographic museum Trocadero in Paris, had played a major role in the first decades of the twentieth century, as the avant-garde artists who conceived ‘primitivism’ came to visit the collection. The ambiguous position of the museum—between a universalist message and a differentialist logic—is still present in the new display. While the colonial history of parts of the remaining collections is scarcely addressed, the permanent exhibition is structured after a Paul Gauguin painting—*D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* (1897-1898)—without naming this reference or discussing the painter's problematic role in the exoticization of Tahiti. At the very moment when the restitution debate finally regains traction, and magazines like *National Geographic* start to reflect on their own racist history, the Musée de l'Homme re-opened after a ten-year period of renovation, having lost big parts of its collections, but without critically addressing its complex history.<sup>10</sup> In the new permanent exhibition, anthropometric plaster casts are displayed alongside sound samples of non-Western languages that can be listened to by pulling on a plastic tongue—it is hard to find a more objectifying approach to these “sensitive collections.”<sup>11</sup>

We visited the museum with over 50 people, together with anthropologist Benoît de l'Estoile, whose book *The Taste of the Other* (2007) retraces how anthropological museums in France evolved from colonial fairs to museums of world cultures.<sup>12</sup> The group was equipped with light technology, allowing the discreet amplification of the speaker's voice, and filming and recording without asking for

permission. As a group that was bigger than allowed, occupying the physical and sound space, we introduced a slight disturbance in the museum's usual silence in a performative manner, and raised the question of the right to film in public museums. As Bénédicte Savoy, who works together with Felwine Sarr in the commission on restitution mandated by the French government, recently underlined in a brilliant speech at UNESCO, there is a close link between the question of illegitimate appropriation of cultural artifacts and its reappearance in cinema in recent years.<sup>13</sup> From the famous museum scene in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) to Alonso Ruizpalacio's fiction *Museo* (2018), she shows how the contestation of the museums' authority to control the objects is omnipresent in popular culture today, and thus far from being an elitist preoccupation, but instead fully participating in the vivid negotiation of the circulation and appropriation of cultural artifacts and symbols.

From this initial visit on, the work of the network developed in a decentralized manner, with regular collective meetings. Each school picked up a museum, a colonial garden, or natural history collection in its own city or nearby, and undertook research at a local level. This manner of working had been proposed for practical reasons, as it is impossible to bring all the students together regularly, and it also allowed us to avoid the pitfalls of a single perspective: we had to deal with many places, many (sometimes conflicting) histories, many voices, many eyes and their dynamic, ever-changing relations. Over the subsequent two years, the network gathered in several cities, alternating input-driven meetings and conferences with workshops concentrating on the students' works. The schools focused on different aspects, such as post-ethnographic cinema, with screenings of Jean Rouch, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Mathieu K. Abonnenc, among others; botany and colonialism, with Teresa Castro, Samir Boumédiène, Uriel Orlow, and Laura Huertas Millán, including alternative gardening practices like the communal garden initiated by Alejandra Riera in Bourges; or animistic experimentations and their critical relation to modernity, with Ana Vaz, Pauline M'barek, Issa Samb, and Kobe Matthys, to name but a few. At least twice a year, a common event allowed us to exchange and work together. The following describe some of these instances.

The gathering titled *Scenarios for an Anti-Museum* took place in Aubervilliers in March 2017. This three-day workshop of collective filming, viewing, editing, performing...—with a screening program (*Beyond Walls and Showcases*) and the participation of invited

artist Mohammed Bourouissa—brought ethnographic museum and colonial gardens into resonance with contemporary global trade routes. Aubervilliers is one of the biggest Chinese fabric and clothes hotspots in Europe, but also the home of many urban plants that hail from distant place, and this particular context allowed for the discussion of questions of ethics while making films in-depth. Referring to classics like *bell hooks* (1992) and Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo's *Agarrando Pueblo* (1978), ideas about the 'insisting gaze' and 'poverty pornography'—the presence of the camera in a neighborhood with significant social differences—were here confronted with the necessity of careful negotiations of the right to the image and the role of the artist in public space.

The next meeting, titled *Trouble in the Museum Storages*, took place in Marseille, in November 2017. It consisted of a week of lectures, exhibition visits, screenings, and roundtables in the context of the conference "The Position of the Researcher", questioning the figure of the artist as ethnographer, critically described by Hal Foster.<sup>14</sup> Participants included Kapwani Kiwanga, Marie Voignier, Mathieu K. Abonnenc, Benoît de l'Estoile, Natacha Nisic, Philippe Artières, Ali Cherri, Vincent Meessen, Uriel Orlow, and others. The work was initiated by a critical discussion of the exhibition *Bilingual Documents*—curated by Sabrina Grassi and Érik Bullo, at MUCEM, with work by Yto Barrada, Omar Berrada & M'Barek Bouhchichi, Érik Bullo, Uriel Orlow, and Abril Padilla—that confronted scientific discourse and popular arts and crafts from the museum collections through the works of contemporary artists. Subsequently, our workshop focused on modes of working based on the physical experience of space and bodily movement and the collective production of screenplays by editing elements of a seemingly accidental real—inspired by Uriel Orlow's *Unmade Film* (2012)—and met during long days of talks and lectures, interrogating the possibilities and limits of artistic interventions in ethnographic museums.

A little later, a smaller-scale workshop with Ali Cherri on mud, big infrastructural projects (dams) and their social and

13 Bénédicte Savoy, keynote at the UNESCO conference, "Circulation of Cultural Property and Shared Heritage: What New Perspectives?," June 1, 2018, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYcav5OYma8> (accessed August 1, 2018).

14 Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995).

symbolic consequences followed, titled *Stagnant Waters*. This took place in the context of the exhibition by Candice Lin, *A Hard White Body*, at Bétonsalon, Center for Art and Research, Paris, in December 2017. We closed the series with *The Vacation of the Museum*, in Grenoble in April/May 2018, a week imagining the empty museums as a starting point. In this hypothetical scenario there were no more showcases and labels to structure the visit, but a call to inhabit the space by practices of reciprocity. The week was composed around a range of screenings and lectures, including by Myriam Suchet, on interdisciplinary hetero-linguist thought and practice; Lisl Ponger, on her artistic interventions in the Vienna museum for ethnography and the legacies of structuralism; Anne Reijniers and Rob Jacobs, who showed their film *L'échangeur* (2016), which deals with Belgian colonial monuments in the DR Congo and their contestation by performance; Andrés Padilla Domene, with *Ciudad Maya* (2016), a film on a group of young Maya people and their use of space; Mamadou Khouma Gueye and *Kedougou* (2017), focusing on the use of a former Senegalese prison as a workshop by a blacksmith; Laura Huertas Millán's experimental documentary in a tropical green house in Northern France, titled *Voyage en la terre autrement dite* (2011), and a final exhibition with the students' works.

For all events and gatherings, we worked with local institutions in the cities, including museums, art centers, cinemas, and universities. Réseau Cinema brought together PhD students with art students, students having worked on subjects related to museum and ethnography and those totally new in the field, writers, theorists, and filmmakers with very different approaches in their work. These collaborations proved to be much more confrontational than expected, and required us to try and overcome cherished certitudes and negotiate deeply personal convictions. We experienced how the constant translation between practices, artistic and theoretical languages takes place in the process—sometimes through tense exchanges, with outright clashes and hostilities, sometimes by finding agreements and bringing about new connections.

Réseau Cinema has come to a stage of its work at which it is crucial to understand our own modes of working. This is why the focus is currently shifting toward collective practices, finding conceptual company in what the French art historian Véronique Goudinoux has labeled “œuvrer à plusieurs”—which could be translated as “artwork as many” (with “artwork” being a verb, not a noun). The author describes collective practices from the Renaissance until



Fig. 2

fig 2 Dae inum ipsum hil et quiatem que nonsequas dolo quossitae pratimet que pernatem rem etur? Odi commolu ptaernatur magnit, solorporum untis sunt fugiti omnis reseque possimp oreptatus evelicium repuda verumqui offici commisi ommissita velectur?

the presence and insists on their negotiated, never accomplished character.<sup>15</sup> She proposes different models, heuristically useful to understand our journey. For us, this engagement includes a further opening up of our decision-making structures to the contributions of the students at the conceptual level—and to increasingly working in a modular manner.

When the Réseau started, the idea was to work on a collective film dealing with a specific subject matter. Over time we moved toward a more composite mode of working, trying to bring different interrogations into resonance with each other. While this does not mean that we discuss all choices until we reach a consensus, it does allow for a less rigid structure, and for more open modes of collaboration: to permit divergences to exist. Among the initial structures for operation was a pyramidal one, with a large collective working process under the guidance of a few, which would later be edited by a small group, and eventually signed by fewer still. This is a structure very common to many (successful) artists' practices, whose work is often produced in the studio by many minds and hands, while it gets exhibited and sold under only their name.

Another possibility was a radically collective approach that would include permanent horizontal decisions on every level. Joanne Richardson describes such approaches in her text "Making Films Politically" (2009). Her understanding of collective filmmaking takes inspiration in Cornelius Castoriadis's notion of "the political" as a creative act of instituting, as a collective undertaking by people to shape their own institutions and to self-regulate their participation in the social field."<sup>16</sup> She emphasizes the "inherent possibilities of [cinema's and notably video's] technological apparatus for democratization by breaking the barriers between experts and amateurs and between active producers and passive consumers".<sup>17</sup> Her proposition consists of a shift from "a metaphysical conception of representation, a naturalized interpretation of the relations between the image and the reality it refers to" to a constant investigation on "how images find their meaning and disrupting the rules of representation," by taking into account intersubjective relations, representation, form, ownership, and reception as equally crucial dimensions.<sup>18</sup> Following this model, signature would be either absent or collective.

While the inclusion of the modes of production, the economy of artistic work, along with formal and content decisions, was a helpful element to take into account for the work of Réseau Cinema, the group proved to be too large and diverse, the approaches too

different, the available time for negotiation too short to choose a radically collective option. Progressively, as we were seeking for a transformative mode of cinematographic collaboration, which included the idea of decolonization of the image, we created a framework that would allow for heterogeneous languages to resonate, without abandoning their particularity, and without individualized atomization, which all too frequently occurs in art schools with pedagogical processes favoring mainly strong individual voices. An idea that we found expressed very well in Aimé Césaire's writings, which confronted the French nation with the need to overcome normative universalism and segregating particularism alike from the mid-1930s. In close affinity to this idea, in her recent contribution to Virginie Bobin's edited book *Composing Differences*, Judith Revel declares that the challenge is "to create in the form of an excess, of a surplus of reality, something that allows differences as differences [...] to recognize themselves as a constituent power within it."<sup>19</sup> Obviously, it is a challenge to work from this perspective, on all levels, and we know that we most probably won't meet our own expectations. We know that the purity of a theoretical statement seldom comes close to the messy reality of its everyday negotiations, but we can be guided by our desires to share resources and approaches, rather than to compete over them.

15 Véronique Goudinoux, *Œuvrer à plusieurs : regroupements et collaborations entre artistes* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2015).

16 Joanne Richardson, "Making Films Politically," in Tobias Hering (ed.), *Der Standpunkt der Aufnahme/Point of View. Positionen politischer Film- und Videoarbeit* (Berlin: Archive Books & Arsenal-Institut für Film und Videokunst, 2014).

17 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

19 Judith Revel, "Producing Subjectivity, Producing the Common: Three challenges and a slightly long postscript on what the common is not," in Virginie Bobin (ed.), *Composing Differences—Imagining New Models for Knowledge Production and Exchange* (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2015) p. 24.