

## AN INTERVIEW WITH MARSHA MESKIMMON: “ART IS NOT A HAPPY LITTLE DECORATION IN THE CORNER. IT’S A PLACE WHERE RADICAL NEW IDEAS EMERGE”<sup>1</sup>

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**ANDREA PÉREZ FERNÁNDEZ [APF]:** The book that sums up your doctoral research [*We Weren't Modern Enough*, 1999] was published more than two decades ago. In it, you look at the work of several little-known women artists from the Weimar period in Germany (1919-1933). What led you to take an interest in them?

**MARSHA MESKIMMON [MM]:** Like a lot of questions about origins, the answer is overdetermined: I can both remember and retrace that moment in my own research, but I also put a narrative on it from now. At the time that I was looking at them, what was most interesting to me was the fact that, in the literature, women artists were understood to have been present in modernism, but not always written about as if they had any impact or influence on the key movements in the period. I was increasingly looking at feminist approaches to art history, and I really

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enjoyed learning more about the Weimar period. But I didn't find women written into those histories very much in most of the sources. Gradually, I came across one or two. And I thought to myself that it was likely to be the case that, like many other historical periods, their "absence" did not demonstrate the failure of women to be involved in the making of art at the time, but a failure of the histories that did not *record* their involvement. So my interest really came from the juxtaposition of those two things: what a dynamic time the Weimar Republic was, and an interest in where women were as cultural contributors. And how exciting when those two things came together!

**APF:** You were looking at one of the most studied periods in history: the inter-war years in Germany after the November Revolution. However, you did not find it easy to access the materials and sources that you needed to trace women's cultural contributions. How do you explain this?

**MM:** I think there are a number of different answers to that. One particular kind of reason for the source problem came from a change in climate and attitude in Germany after the war. So, not only a sense of rejecting of some of the trends in Weimar, but, in the period following the war [shortly after 1945] in particular, those artists who were associated with realism were seen to have potentially pre-figured a kind of National Socialist realism, which they *didn't*. And historically that's a misread, a *very* strong misread of how 1920s and 1930s realist and figurative traditions were produced.

Quite a lot of the women artists who were involved in the Weimar years —either through graphic arts or through their work in illustration or painting— were involved in realist and figurative traditions. So they were engaged in this kind of production and their work (often to their own chagrin) became associated, after the war, with a kind of de-valued realism that people didn't really want to know about. So I think there was a kind of a temporary loss just because the historical climate changed and much of the Weimar art that was not directly understood to be anti-fascist was relegated to the pile of "not interesting". It was of course *extremely* interesting and once you start looking at it, you begin to realize how dynamic the time was, both in terms of some of the now well-rehearsed debates about abstraction and realism, but also about how gender played into those.

A deep interest in re-thinking Weimar art does not re-emerge in German material until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when people begin to look back at the *Neue Sachlichkeit* or the late expressionist practices with a different eye. So, I think that part of the problem with finding the women artists from the Weimar Republic who interested me most was that the history of the period was itself so politically

charged—focused on *winners* and *losers* in a really binary, black and white terms—when, in fact, all the excitement was in the shades of gray.

**APF:** In the book, you deal with artists whose work is clearly rooted in the Weimar political context. However, many of the artists that you mention, like Jeanne Mammen or Gerta Overbeck, aren't often considered "political" in the History of Art. Were things also simplified in determining which artists made "political art"?

**MM:** I suspect part of the argument here is that even an artist who is taking a stance by withdrawing from public, political life into a realm of art or aesthetics is in fact making a political choice. I don't think there's a space outside politics in that very broad sense into which you can actually *vanish*, and become immaterial or something... I think you are always acting when you are an artist, or a maker of any kind of visual material or spatial form that will be read in a social world. Where you stand on that line is another matter altogether, but I would say that women's activity in the visual arts in the Weimar Republic was extremely political whether those women identified with party politics or not. Just the fact of what they were doing was a profoundly political act in that period, because they were really challenging a whole range of norms by operating as professional artists.

**APF:** This has to do with how we define politics, and what aspects of reality have to do with it. In your chapter in the book *Visions of the 'Neue Frau'* you develop these biases further. And you explain that they affect women in particular, at least in the case of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

**MM:** You've pointed out something I think is really quite important: the way in which someone understands what is political is also a function of how they understand history, and how they understand the position from which they are writing about the political.

The vast majority of authors at the time that I was working on this, at the late 1980s or early nineties, looking back on the Weimar Republic and its politicized art, would tend to write to a "formal" sense of politics. That is, they would be looking at party political activity, at explicit relationships with Marxism, Communism or with National Socialism, or even with the Christian Democrats, etc. They'd be looking for *specific registers of the political*. And if they didn't find women in those registers, they would just say "well that's because they're not very political". Hopefully, that really changed quite radically over the last couple of decades in terms of thinking about what constitutes the political for subjects who have been marginalized from those formal discourses for generations.

In the context of the Weimar Republic, women had attained the vote, but they hadn't been active in party political activities for very long. You're talking about a very new type of political engagement for women. And so they don't immediately become obviously political in those terms. You have to look for other kinds of things. And I think if you look back on the really significant women's movements that emerged in those periods, and if you look at some of the very significant questions they raised in their work and in their lives, around employment, education, professionalization, independence, even women choosing not to marry, for example, but instead to work in the new urban (and suburban) kinds of white collar work that was emerging. Those are really very radical positions to take at that time. They are not without a political shade, even if they don't align very easily with a very simple notion of party politics with left and right boundaries. If we look at the way in which political art has been talked about in some of those early modernist periods, we are looking at a very limited notion of politics that does tend to exclude quite a lot of subjects who were actually highly politicized in their lives, including almost all of the women that I looked at in my work.

**APF:** Thus, historicizing women's political participation outside the boundaries of party politics implies questioning the sources we use...

**MM:** The question of what constitutes the archive becomes really important. If you only use the mainstream sources when you're looking back into history, you often replicate the same narrative. Whereas if you actually try to look in slightly different places, in slightly different kind of archives, thinking about the archive in a very broad sense, you generate different ideas. What was in the newspaper? What was in the burgeoning women's press? What was happening in terms of the cities, in the suburbs, in women's labor? And, in the arts, in varied forms, like the so-called "low forms" of popular media, etc.? When you extend your archive to ask different questions, you start to find things, and those things lead you to a very different tale, a very different story.

**APF:** It seems to me that when it comes to historicizing women's artistic production, scholars have often focused more on the obstacles women faced than on their contributions. That is, we have focused on the reasons for the absence of women's production, often without realizing that there was in fact a lot of women's production, as you said before regarding the question of the archive. Does this have anything to do with the liberal hegemony in Gender Studies?

**MM:** The phenomenon you're pointing to concerns the way in which feminism first entered into the Euro-American academy, moving through what tends to be understood as a "liberal feminist trajectory", which focuses on the idea that there might be an "essential" sameness shared by all women. And beyond that essential sameness you might simply find a series of obstacles or conditions that have meant that women haven't been able to access power. But I think in moving beyond that narrative you begin to find something very different. I was certainly struck very early in my work by the exciting research of feminist scholars who were in fact turning up enormous amounts of material confirming women's very successful art practices from hundreds and hundreds of years back. And that's only looking at Europe! So you have this very narrow understanding that tells the story that "now women are powerful and in the past they were not". This suggests histories are a single straight line of overcome obstacles, that there is a linear route to something we might call *success*. That's a very poor understanding of the past.

And this is not only particular to women. If you're looking at any non-normative subjects —i.e. Black, Indigenous, and people of color, colonized subjects, queer, trans and non-binary folk as well—, you are looking at people who have been actively excluded from a mainstream discourse. You are not looking at individuals who have not survived, or who have not lived, or who have not been creative or engaged in the arts and every other form of creativity. You are looking at a structure that pushes to the margins or excludes any non-normative subject from the dialogues and the narratives that create coherent historical legacies in the terms that we have inherited in Eurocentric discourse. What has come to interest me, and occupy much of my research for the past two decades, is how Art History is itself part of that structuring logic, and what we would have to do in order to re-structure it so that we are able to see the incredibly dynamic and exciting contributions of a whole range of subjects who have been left outside those types of mainstream storytelling.

**APF:** In this context, I imagine feminist art historiography has been of great help; with texts such as the foundational "Why there have been no great women artists" by Linda Nochlin, or Griselda Pollock's work from the point of view of Social History.

**MM:** They both had a strong impact. I can remember seeing the first edition of an article that Pollock wrote called "Vision, voice and power" in *Block* when I was an undergraduate student. It had a huge impact on me in relation to thinking about the histories of art that I was being taught. Pollock's work challenged you to think very differently about what art historical narratives might set out to reveal *and* conceal through their methods, in their strategies, and by means of encoding

gendered power relations into *visual* culture. No matter what we think of them, these structures are present. But if we find ways to understand art's histories differently, we might actually reconceive gendered visual culture and visibility in quite a radical way. And of course, as soon as I became interested in feminist work as a student, the questions that were raised so brilliantly by Linda Nochlin around women artists and women's cultural contribution played in very strongly in the development of my thinking.

In particular, Nochlin begins to say that we need to think about gendered cultural production in a much more profound sense than that of naming "obstacles". We are all operating in a field of knowledge production that will relegate the knowledge of some people in favor of the knowledge of others, and that is not a natural process. That is not simply something about the facilities people have, and it's not simply a matter of identifying the obstacles and removing them. Rather, it asks us to acknowledge that the very nature of entering into art historical study is part of an engagement with all the aspects of power and all the aspects of knowledge that either center or marginalize particular subjects. In addition to Pollock and Nochlin, I started doing my PhD as a whole generation of feminist scholars in the arts were coming into their own, and was also lucky to be in Britain, working in the context of feminist scholars like Deborah Cherry, Gen Doy, Rosemary Betterton, Anthea Callen, Tamar Garb, Gill Perry, and Lynda Nead.

**APF:** Bringing all this material to light and pointing out this amount of production also allows us to break up this very European *cliché* of "discovery". We like to think that we are the first to think of something, or to discover *the* woman who was "exceptional" in her time and "save" her work from being forgotten.

**MM:** I think your point about the narrative construction is really well taken here. Not only are we cast as "discoverers" but as "saviors". As academics we discover things all the time, but often as not, the language of discovery is also a logic of colonization, and we use it to look back on the past and assimilate others' histories within our own dominant narratives, rather than recognizing them in their own terms. These assimilative narratives too commonly mirror our presuppositions, telling us only why we are so powerful and so important!

I really hope that my work problematizes those narratives of the past, because I don't think there was a time when people didn't know anything and that now, suddenly, we know everything. That's a terrible way to look at the past. There are all sorts of unbelievably exciting and creative ways of thinking about gender, sexuality, visibility, identity, politics, and power from times gone by, and we could probably learn a lot from taking them on their own terms.

**APF:** Shortly after finishing your PhD, you began to focus on self-portraiture, which led you to the book *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (1996).

**MM:** There was a lot of self-portraiture in the work that I was coming across while researching my PhD, and I was, basically, putting notes in a folder thinking “this will be an interesting project to wonder about when I finish my thesis”. As a PhD researcher I had a very specific interest in women’s cultural contributions to modernism, and it was fairly straightforwardly European. But in a wider sense I was interested in non-normative subjectivity—including how race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, etc. interacted with the articulation of gender in the making of art. And as I began to work on that project more specifically I began to think that it matters how people are self-defining and what kind of body politics are emerging through that process of identification.

So when you start to try to image a *self*—and I took it as read that “the self” was a quite complicated thing—then you’re articulating intersectional subjectivity in a visual mode. And the visual clues are really important, and those codes vary depending upon how people are positioned, *situated*. At that point I began to be interested in questions of geographies, particularly in how transculturation was important for thinking about art. If you’re talking about a woman artist who has moved from place to place in the world, and has acquired different forms of knowledge, and lived in very different ways as a diasporic, or transcultured, subject and so forth, you are talking about someone who accedes to the notion of imaging themselves as a “woman” in a much more diverse and complex way.

**APF:** And this led you to question the very category of “woman”, much discussed during the last decades.

**MM:** I began very early to agree with people I was reading that there was no simple thing called “woman”, and that “woman” certainly wasn’t universal or essential. I felt that if we were going to call ourselves feminists and think seriously about that, then we needed in a deep and profound sense to tackle these issues around what Elizabeth V. Spelman has beautifully called “inessential woman”. The questions raised by post-colonial discourses, race critical discourses, queer, transgender, and diversity discourses, impact upon and inflect this category all the time.

**APF:** How do we challenge the category of “woman” at the same time that we take care of the transmission and the historization of the production made by those who were socialized as women?

**MM:** I cluster those ideas under the banner of transnational feminisms in terms of perspective. At the risk of saying something very blank and bold, for me, the insights of decolonial, race-critical, queer thinking, along with ecofeminisms... are insights for all of us, absolutely. They are not insights only for people who would be called “women”, or only for those standing against the limited construction of “the human” in a Eurocentric tradition. They are about renegotiating a range of knowledge perspectives.

I wouldn't throw away the knowledges that have come from the center, but I would profoundly recast those as just one slim/small version of all the possible stories and tales that we might be able to tell in dialogue. It is my contention, thinking with many others, that we have inherited a legacy of a falsely universalized, but actually very narrow, normative story. It isn't that that story doesn't exist: it's that that story is not *everything* and that story doesn't have the right to dominate and destroy all the other stories, and indeed all the other storytellers.

What are these intellectual shifts about and for? Well, they're not just for art history, and they're not just for books about a particular time period or whatever. For me, they are about trying to understand how thinking might be transformed by these very different and creative practices such that we might actually have a more equitable distribution of power and understanding more broadly. So, these issues are bigger than feminism and art, yet I would say that feminism and art are one core place in which we might make these kinds of new ideas take shape.

**APF:** In this sense, you have fled from the debate—mainly American, but also very influential in Europe—between recognition and redistribution. What's your position about it?

**MM:** It tends to be assumed to be a debate between Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser in a way, but actually is a bigger question. My own position on this is that it's a question about how you ensure that intellectual and academic issues are actually linked to social justice issues. In that way both sides of this debate are very important.

Unfortunately, the initial arguments that emerged turned it into a polarized and binary debate which assumed that recognition somehow was in opposition to redistribution. Certainly Butler, Fraser and others have begun to think about this as *not* being something which is an “either/or”. I concur; my logic is much less binary —away from “either/or”, towards “both/and”. Not only are both recognition and redistribution important, but they are also folded into each other. The arguments and discussions about economic and material justice can't be separated from arguments about discursive, intellectual or representational justice. Those



things are, in fact, quite profoundly interconnected. And I think that moving away from the “either/or” to the position of a “both/and” is actually about changing the very nature of the way in which we think about the subject. It shifts from an identity politics (which would be an essentialized identity politics) to an idea about non-essential identifications. So that how one identifies may be constrained by material/discursive structures, but is never wholly contained by them.

I’m much more in agreement with people like Elizabeth V. Spelman, María Lugones, Audre Lorde and other decolonial, race-critical feminists, who have argued that categories like race, gender, sexuality, identity are not essential qualities of subjects, but are in fact produced through power relationships. And those power relationships are discursive and material at the same time. So they are about both recognition and redistribution. And if we locate ourselves in these very essentializing politics—and I would recall here the work of thinkers like Nira Yuval-Davis who moves beyond this deadlock—we always end up with the so-called “oppression Olympics”. Which identity is most hard done by or in need of help? I would rather explore the coalitional politics of transversal dialogue; the potential to work with and across differences and, as very different individuals, enact politics together in a much less polarizing forum.

**APF:** In past discussions we have talked about the (political and scientific) need to focus on the system that excludes, rather than on particular individuals. I really thought it was a great way to get out of these kinds of debates.

**MM:** That’s critical. Looking at the individuals all the time and trying endlessly to find the ideal description for every single category is another form of reification of essential identity. From this point of view, you believe that there is a truth somewhere in that identity, and that you will find it if you just dig deep enough or whatever, and this truth of the subject will be permanent and unchanging and so forth. I just don’t think that makes any sense. I think subjects are brought into subject positions in myriad ways and through multiple and intersecting structures.

And these structures are also representational: they are about recognition, discursive narratives, storytelling, image-making... and they carry power that has real material consequences! They are the basis on which—in many instances—power and resources have been allocated. So it is important to talk about how one actually manages to think more critically about redistribution in that sense—in and as the structure, not solely originating in the subject. The ways in which we collectively produce knowledges and distribute what resources and what powers we have creates identifications and not vice versa.

**APF:** Some people say that this active listening to all those perspectives that question the pillars of Western political thought as we know it (the idea of a knowable subject, of truth, of boundaries...) makes it difficult to engage in the search for truth.

**MM:** There is a kind of false dichotomy here too. When you say there's no *one* truth that doesn't mean you're saying that there's *no* truth. Many *is not* any! I would argue that saying that there are many possible stories, many possible narratives, many possible perspectives on the truth, does *not* mean that we have a free-for-all where rigorous argument and responsibility simply vanishes and every claim is just as valid and viable as the next.

**APF:** You argue that leaving the binary does not imply relativism.

**MM:** Absolutely. It's not about anything goes. A feminist research methodology that is profoundly anti-binary is not saying there is no evidence for anything, or arguing that any point is valid. Rather, it has much more to do with tracing the multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflictual, historical, and theoretical links between phenomena—no one, inevitable narrative of the past. For example, take the archive. Once you go and look at an archive, any store of materials from the past, you find that there are *indeed* women in that archive, even if we're told they were not present or making an impact in the past. Likewise, although we are sometimes told that the profound cultural contact that underlies globalization is new, people in the world have been making contact with one another and cultures have been cross-fertilizing since time immemorial. It is the idea of a type of "pure" study of a single place and time, for example, of saying something like "French art" that is anomalous. Well, what does "French art" mean? What is "France"? Or "Europe" in singular, bounded terms? When you study "periods" and geographies closely, they explode outward. Bodies, times and spaces are often radically interconnected with (O)thers that are defined as different to them, even their polar opposite, and it is in these crossings and connections that binary thinking shatters and new ideas emerge.

**APF:** This leads us to your current project, the trilogy *Transnational Feminisms and the Arts*. The first volume is precisely entitled *Transnational Feminisms, Transversal Politics and Art: Entanglements and Intersections*. How can we, as researchers, focus on connecting (and not on categorizing and separating) without being overwhelmed by the number of constantly intersecting variables?

**MM:** Perhaps one example is in the work of historians who are now thinking much more around the notion of Oceanic History—how can we possibly understand the world as a set of discrete bounded land masses when these have been connected by oceanic and archipelagic movement for centuries? I'm very interested in scholars who are talking about how what we now call the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, have constituted radically interconnected worlds that do not simply coincide with the bounded entities we term nation states. That is a different way of thinking about the cross-cultural connections of ideas. And so rather than a post-modern celebration of radical relativism, that kind of scholarly work is a profoundly material-discursive understanding of the world as a transhemispheric sea of connections.

The upshot of this is that we have to do a lot more work to understand it, because often the historical narratives have been conceived and structured as separate entities, but the connections are there. We can either pay attention to the connectivity or we can pay attention to the borders and separations. I'm interested in connections and crossings much more than I'm interested in the borders. But that is not a free-for-all, it is a materialist and grounded study!

**APF:** The second volume, *Transnational Feminisms and Art's Transhemispheric Histories: Ecologies and Genealogies*, talks about the notion of "Horizontal History". I find it very interesting the way in which, when talking about history, you increasingly use terms that allude more to space than to time.

**MM:** That is a very interesting point. Not only are we dealing with a certain kind of linear notion of the unfolding of time, but equally, the problem of space. And I would add bodies. My sense is that not only are mainstream histories exceptionally linear, but also very limited and fixed by place. Stories assume a kind of identification around place, and also assume that bodies can be essentialized and linked to those places and times.

But all those dominant narratives are beginning to come apart. The idea of "horizontal histories" —which was Piotr Piotrowski's kind of narrative for that— or these ideas of "minor histories" or "minor keys"... I think they're always about trying to think differently about the processes by which bodies, spaces and times are interconnected. And more to the point: that not everything operates with the binary logic of center and periphery.

I've begun, as you say, to be thinking much more specifically around the global and the planetary being connected through ideas of things like transhemispheric connectivities and trans-scalar ecologies of knowledge. The whole question of biopolitics and biologies, of geopolitics and geologies—and indeed geontologies, to

refer to someone like Elizabeth Povinelli—are ways of moving away from center/periphery binaries and towards worlds that might be more than human. How do human stories connect with greater/more than human stories, geological stories, etc. These for me are a kind of a *transhemispheric tale*.

**APF:** You also refer to genealogies. How can we draw these genealogies in this kind of trans-hemispheric tales? I am thinking specifically of the notion of a “hidden tradition”, for example, which Fina Birulés takes from Hannah Arendt to refer to feminine thought.

**MM:** In fact, the trilogy is in some ways about constructing an alternative genealogy. So in that sense I think it lends itself to something that I have been wondering about for some time, namely, how to mobilize a very disobedient definition of genealogy such that people are able to speak across times and spaces with their ideas and their connections in much more radical configurations.

For example, I was strongly influenced by the work that has been called “Australian feminisms” (the work of people like Moira Gatens, Genevieve Lloyd, Elizabeth Grosz, Rosalyn Diprose, amongst others). They came out of the late ‘80s and early ‘90s and very specifically countered notions of Cartesian dualism with emergent ideas that were variously monistic, rhizomatic, decolonial—that focused on embodiment and situated knowledges. That material speaks incredibly well to feminist critiques of science, cyborgs, matter, and so on, in the work of scholars like Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, and Rosi Braidotti—only recently has Haraway’s really profound thinking around the Earth and its “critters”, a very strong kind of environmental and more than human discourse, if you like, started to be understood to be key to contemporary art practices. And then, for me, these trajectories speak very beautifully in chorus with Black radical traditions: the work of Sylvia Wynter on the human, Audrey Lorde on survival and poetics, Hortense Spillers’ really moving ideas of homilectics, M. Jacqui Alexander’s “pedagogies of crossing”, and so on. Add to this, the wonderful pan-Indigenous feminisms from the Pacific, in the circumpolar regions, and across the Americas: Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Rauna Kuokannen, Jodi Byrd, Teresia Teaiwa, Nandita Sharma, amongst so many names, and a very different kind of feminist genealogy begins to unfold.

Unlike the “autogenesis” that upholds the tradition of European philosophy, which starts with the work of the Great Master, then the Great Master’s student, who interprets their work and, eventually becomes the next Master—all in a nice tidy singular lineage—the kind of lineage that I’m talking about is much more rhizomatic, braided, dialogic. There is never just one voice, but a polyphony, a fugue, a glorious chromatic chorus. The genealogies I trace in *Transnational Feminisms*

are very disobedient, very unruly, and very impure—thinking with people like Maria Lugones and Alexis Shotwell—profoundly polyphonic and really exciting.

**APF:** Throughout the research linked to this trilogy, you have ended up thinking a lot about the relationship between history and imagination. Precisely to trace these kinds of genealogies, but also to think about the role that feminism and art have in all this.

**MM:** Over a long period of time, in trying to understand and think about questions to do with the theoretical parameters of knowledge production in relation to individual subjects on the ground, I've increasingly come up against the idea that the most significant space is often occupied by imagination, by creativity, by aesthetics, by forms of radical prefigurative politics that operate through very non-linear structures, that are often quite profoundly both world-making and world-breaking. Politics, ethics, and aesthetics work very powerfully together. And more importantly, the material and the imaginative are not separate from one another in some kind of binary logic that would pit the "real world", against the "myth", or the worlds produced in art. I actually think that those structures are deeply interconnected.

I'm interested in a kind of new materialist interpretation, say the kind of thoughts about intra-action that Karen Barad and others have talked about. We live in a material-discursive realm, we exist as material-discursive entities. Sylvia Wynter talks about us being *homo narrans*. We are both embodied, material subjects, but also narrative/narrating subjects: we are storying and flesh, and we are perennially intertwined as both of these things.

That brings questions of imagination, of discourse, story, and creativity really strongly to the fore. When we look at the most integral and transformative possibilities for change that art can bring, we are brought up against the creative, embedded, and entangled matter of the world. Art is not a happy little decoration in the corner: it's a place where radical new ideas emerge.

**APF:** Is creativity, then, a real transformative space?

**MM:** The idea that the artwork could potentially have agency started early in my work. I began to think about it in terms of the ideas about imaging selves, for example; that the production of the image *was* the articulation of *selfhood*—it was not an after effect, but part and parcel of the materialization of any potential sense of self. And in that way, the role that imagination and art can play in culture has stayed with me in my work, and I remain convinced by it. There are people who

would argue very differently about that, but I would argue that quite a lot of transformative understandings of the world, and our place in it, have been materialized first in the arts because the arts connect imagination and materiality to the affective registers of knowledge-production.

I wrote something recently that brought me to the work of feminist peace studies. And what struck me was that activist-scholars like Cynthia Cockburn and others argue very strongly that one of the first and most important things in bringing peace to a conflict zone is the ability to *imagine* a peaceful scenario. So there they are, in the middle of the most war-torn conflict-ridden spaces in the world, trying to negotiate a settlement, and they're saying that the most important thing is for everyone at the table to be able to make an *imaginative leap* to a different way of understanding the world than the one they currently have! I think we should be listening to feminist activists working in those conflict zones, when they say, in all seriousness, that imagination is imperative to social transformation. They should know.

And so, instead of saying imagination isn't real, let's argue that imagination is profoundly real, and it is the first step to change. And, of course, it is no surprise that this resounds through the Black radical tradition too—from Audre Lorde to bell hooks to Fred Moten, and beyond. When they write about the motor force of creativity, aesthetics, and imagination, they convey it as a space of survival for all those subjects who were never intended to survive, those whom the dominant culture would happily see dead. And yet they're saying that not only are those subjects *surviving*, but more importantly, that they're *surviving*, and *flourishing*, precisely because they have radical creativity in their toolkit. And I use toolkit on purpose, echoing Audre Lorde's wonderful phrase about the master's tools. One of the tools that she pulls forth all the time is the radicality of creativity, and Black feminisms are profoundly engaged with this notion of aesthetics and creativity. And again, that is a tradition that I think everyone can learn from and listen to. It is a profound, intellectually and creatively transformative, way of thinking about the world.

**APF:** This view implies a reconsideration of the value of certain forms of knowledge production. In a context in which the historicization of art and culture itself is already often in the background, as if it had nothing to do with social history or emancipatory traditions.

**MM:** I think the point you just made is really important. What you decide to look at and study is about where and how you are situated. And it strikes me that we are living in a time in which the most interesting discourses around, for instance,

the Anthropocene, are discourses that are absolutely multivalent, multidisciplinary, and require multiple forms of expertise even to engage. It is clear that no one way of thinking about the world (not just technology, not just art, not just science, not just the humanities...) is going to enable us to move against climate crisis and species extinction, towards environmental and social justice. In order to meet the challenges of the present, we're going to have to bring many knowledges together. This will also mean valuing knowledges that have been seen as peripheral, such as knowledges from the South(s), and Indigenous understandings of the world.

And yet again, returning to a subject we discussed earlier, a lot of really powerful decolonial thinking talks about imagination, creativity, poetics, and aesthetics; the epistemologies of the South(s) do not leave creative thinking behind. I don't find this surprising. Scholars, artists, activists who seek to decolonize imagination, create social transformation and environmental change, are taking the arts very seriously. Not a particular kind of art, but the arts as a way of knowing the world that is not necessarily limited to an immediate reductive technocratic solution to an isolated problem. For me, this is an important way of thinking about systemic change, and how we might reconnect and reimagine other possibilities for living.

**APF:** As a Full Professor at a European university, do you consider that academia allows you to produce this kind of knowledge?

**MM:** This is a question about the pragmatic issues that constrain our ideas. You can be committed to a whole series of ideas but if in your daily life you can't affect anything, then there are some serious questions about the nature of whether your pursuits are actually supporting your intellectual insights or not. And I have to say I tend to hover on this question of the academic environment because I don't think the academic environment is all one unified place.

I think there remain strongly constrained practices of knowledge production in the academy, and I think these are very much *disciplined*, and that they often stop people from having a voice, whilst making it difficult for something new to emerge. There are certain scholars who have left the academy precisely because they have felt that their political activist beliefs are not being sustained by these systems. And I can completely understand why they've done that. I read some of those things and think "yes, I completely see that". And there are also people who just say, "let's burn down the system—let's get rid of this old, antiquated thing and build a university for tomorrow—and it won't look like the universities that we are in now. Or let's build a discipline for tomorrow and it won't look like the one that we practice today". And I can see that too.

But within those creaking structures there are also some very powerful and hopeful signs of change. Even institutions that are incredibly embedded within power structures—institutions that were completely complicit with European colonial expansion, for example, or institutions that clearly benefited from oppressive regimes in the past—are now questioning what reparations they need to make or how they need to rethink those histories. In many instances not as much as they probably should be (!) and in many instances very cautiously. But at least there is discussion, and at least you can raise questions now in a public forum, whereas many years ago I don't even think you could discuss this striking complicity. It's very difficult to divorce institutional structures from the knowledges made in their name, but sometimes the knowledges push the institutional structures to keep up with the new way of thinking.

**APF:** In fact, as the Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies, at Loughborough University, you are trying to promote this kind of interdisciplinary knowledge and international collaborations. How can this be done in the context of the rigid academic structure?

**MM:** I do think that the Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) has been a very good environment for enabling interdisciplinary and international collaboration to occur. One of the reasons is that it's not very old, so it doesn't have a massive tradition or a big weight to carry—it is a nimble institution. I absolutely love being part of it and being the director is a great pleasure. I'm enjoying it very much! The success of the IAS is that it is just a little bit outside of the heaviest part of the modern institutional structures that so often dominate academic research and that allows the IAS to be more free in terms of what it brings together. And I hope that we continue to maintain this kind of space in the future because such spaces allow a lot of quite radical thought to happen.

**APF:** You're becoming more and more interested in the field of Environmental Humanities. Is this part of this kind of transdisciplinary research that starts with the potential of the arts?

**MM:** The stories, and the art, and the creative way in which we understand ourselves can sometimes determine the types of science we're able to effect. So I don't see these things as being separate. I see them as being in dialogue with one another now. And I think the Environmental Humanities is one of those places where we are starting to have those dialogues.



I find this is an important turn for art and art history because as a discipline Art History has been premised upon a human-centered narrative that has not necessarily served us very well. So if we don't start rethinking art's histories for a more pluriversal kind of "post-Humanities", I reckon we're probably going to see the end of art history as simply irrelevant. That would be a shame since many of the things that art historians know so well how to do in terms of analyzing and understanding the visual, material, and spatial registers of images and objects could be really useful. But not if it stands outside the Environmental Humanities and the questions that are most important in the world today.

We are living in a moment of very clear environmental crisis, which does have to do with us as humans. But it also exceeds us. We've set things into motion and we have unbalanced things, but we are not totally in control and can't just now turn the tap off and say "oh sorry, whoops! We didn't mean to do that, we'll just fix it now!". We are living in a moment that demands that we think *with* a world that is greater than human, but one in which we are important actors. We have to start imagining our embeddedness in a whole range of processes, many of which are simply *bigger*, more extensive, than we are. And this means we cannot act as if we are at the top of some imaginary hierarchy, but rather need to find a role as but one part of an ecology. Environmental Humanities, for me, raises the issue of ecology both in terms of environment, *literally* the environment in which we live, but also the ecologies of knowledge, the structures of knowledge production, that exceed one single discipline, to create the ecological system of knowing and imagining that might change the trajectory of the future.

I think the knowledge that we have had, the conventional epistemology that universalized a very narrow view of the world, has led us to a point of extinction, and pursuing that knowledge doesn't seem to be anything other than a dead end. So I'm very happy to be on the side of the attempted crossings and connections even if those seem a little utopian sometimes, or possibly overreaching. I'd still rather be going hand in hand with fellow travelers heading in that direction.



