

Nomadic Territories and Times

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The curators have brought together artwork that has the potential to make legible critical aspects of the current moment.¹ [YUN1] I want to single out a few aspects that are bubbling in the discussions but that somehow remain slippery. I want to grab this slippery intimation of something that is part of the transformation we are living, even as it remains opaque. But I do this not as an art critic or historian. Mine is a very different language, and I can only hope for a dialogical intersection with the vocabularies of art.

There are rumblings in these artworks that signal that there is much happening beneath the surface of our modernity. I see these rumblings in the tension between a generic modernity that can be globally present and the thick, situated making of a range of dimensions present in some of these artworks—the making of place, of events, of the political. In much of the work, this thick, situated making becomes part of artistic practice, and, I think, a heuristic in that it allows us to see something that gets lost in the visual order of our modernity, one marked by generalities and the generic. Artists can detect, and see, in ways that those of us shaped or confined by prose cannot.

This work illuminates some of the issues I am grappling with in prose. For many readers—perhaps most—my prose may seem completely unconnected to these works of art. All I can hope for is the possibility of a dialogic that transcends the one-to-one equivalence that is a zone of comfort. The fact of a generic modernity beneath which lies the possibility/necessity of thick, situated making is, in my reading, one version of what I see as a defining dynamic or systemic logic at work today. It is, also one that gets easily lost in accounts that only take in the generic, the standardized, the “globalized.” Here, then, are some thoughts offered as a way of disentangling some issues about globalization, the national, and the interactions between globality as a generic standardization and globality as a kind of thick making that can take place anywhere.

At its deepest level, today’s emergent realities and possibilities are a sort of unshackling of foundational categories of social existence (time, subjectivity, territory, authority, rights) from their national encasing. We lack the language with which to capture the thousands of operations that are worming themselves into the established national cages for these foundational elements. These are the cages produced by the project of building

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VISIBLE, where art leaves its own field and becomes visible as part of something else, edited by Angelika Burtscher and Judith Wielander, Sternberg Press, Berlin 2010.

the nation-state and the work of rendering all building blocks of social existence as national, albeit never fully achieved.²

Today, territory and time, subjectivity and identity, are beginning to seep out of these national cages. This easily gets experienced as disorder and crisis, because this nation-**state**-building project standardizes, bureaucratizes, and nationalizes time, territory, and identity. Although it never completely succeeded, the nation-state-building project constituted the organizational formats, the notions of justice and ethics, and the subjectivities of belonging and identity that have dominated during the last century. A synthetic way of saying this is that when the national state is the dominant format, the overarching dynamic is centripetal: the center grasps most of what there is to be had. And what happened outside the borders of territorial states—whether in the impoverished terrains of former empires or at the earth’s poles—was written out of history.

Elsewhere I have developed the notion of denationalization as a category for analysis that aims at capturing a specific set of components in today’s major global transformations, for which the typical terms in use—globalization, postnationalism, and transnationalism—are inadequate. These three terms all point to locations for change that lie outside the nation-state. The effort behind developing a fourth category—denationalization—arises out of an as yet small but growing body of research showing that critical components of today’s major transformations actually take place inside the nation-state. The processes that constitute the transformation in this case have the effect of denationalizing that which has historically been constructed as national. These processes are partial, often highly specialized, and obscure. Further, they frequently continue to be coded, represented, and experienced in the vocabulary of the national, and hence can remain unrecognized and undetected. Thus, this new category for analysis opens up a vast research and theorization agenda connected to global trends but focused on the nation-state.

Today’s catastrophic conditions—the melting of the glaciers, the radicalness of today’s poverty, the violence of extreme economic inequality, the genocidal character of more and more wars—are often seen as part of major “negative” change, of our decay. But it seems to me that they are not new, but rather that they are just becoming visible today in novel ways. They have been there all along, and they are part of our deep past. They are part of that putative no-man’s-land that absorbed the costs of the making of nation-states and capitalism over the last few centuries. They are floating signifiers, speech acts that narrate the current condition in a far more encompassing manner than standard narratives about nation-states and globalization. While these conditions have existed for a long time, today they are crossing new thresholds and, crucially, they become legible as the cages of

the national begin to fall apart and reveal the landscapes of devastation on which they were built. “Our over-cantilevered bridge cannot cope with the warming waters below.”³

We are seeing a proliferation of partial, often highly **specialized** assemblages of bits of territory, authority, and rights once firmly ensconced in national institutional frames which today begin to escape the cages of the national. These assemblages cut across the binary of national versus global. They are well beyond this binary, which is the usual way of attempting to understand what is new today. These emergent assemblages inhabit both national and global institutional and territorial settings. They can be localized, and in that localness have the (powerful) effect of denationalizing bits of national territory. Or, they can span the globe in the form of translocal geographies connecting multiple, often thick subnational spaces—institutional, territorial, subjective. One aspect that matters here is that these thick, subnational settings are building blocks for new global geographies. They do not run through supranational institutions that take out that thickness and **generalize** across differences.

Globalization has brought with it an incipient unbundling of the exclusive authority over territory, people, and identity that we have long associated directly and indirectly with the national state. One way of conceptualizing this unbundling is to posit that it entails a dynamic of denationalizing what had been constructed as the “national” over the last century and more. This construction of the national was in many, though not all, parts of the world a political, economic, legal, and culturally thick process. Thus, current dynamics of globalization need to be understood in the context of this thickly constituted national.

These thick, sub-national settings are building blocks for new global geographies. They do not run through supranational institutions that take out that thickness and generalize across differences. Today’s transformation does not simply refer to that which transcends the national, as is commonly asserted. It names a far more complex and ambiguous negotiation that happens largely inside multiple instances of the national. Such a conceptualization relocates the analytic task from the macro level of interdependencies and cross-border flows to microsites **that** may well remain coded as national. It is an analytic inversion of the usual strategy used to address or study or represent transnationalism and also globalization.

There are sites where these dynamics of denationalization take on thick and consequential forms. Among these sites are, from the perspective of my own research experience, global cities. The global city is a border zone where the old spatialities and temporalities of the national and the new ones of the global digital age become engaged in complex, multi-sited, and multilevel ways. Out of this juxtaposition comes the possibility of a whole series of new economic and cultural projects. Conceivably there are

other sites, including microsites, where the juxtapositions of different spatialities and temporalities are likely to be thick and charged. The centrality of place in a context of global processes engenders a transnational economic, subjective, and political opening in the formation of new claims and hence in the constitution of entitlements, notably of rights to place, and, at the limit, in the constitution of "citizenship" as a more urbanized and less formalized condition. The denationalizing of urban space and the formation of new claims centered in transnational actors and involving contestation raise the question: Whose city is it?

If this lens is used to look at some current, often minor and barely visible, developments, it opens up some interesting vistas.⁴ For instance, this way of narrating the current period allows us to reposition immobility, at a time when the focus is on mobility as an indicator of globality. If globalities are constituted inside the national, then the immobile can be global actors, if they care to—their bodies do not cross the borders of national states, but that does not preclude their being part of global subjectivities and politics. And while the immobile are likely to be among the disadvantaged, the condition is less absolute and less oppressive than the emphasis on mobility suggests. Their powerlessness can become complex and thereby contain the possibility of politics, of making the political. Localized struggles by actors who are not globally mobile are nonetheless critical for the organizational infrastructure of a globally networked politics: it is precisely the combination of localized practices and global networks that makes possible a new type of power for actors who would be seen as powerless in terms of conventional variables. While geographically immobile, these localized actors and their practices are also inflected by their participation and constitutive role in global civil society. Even if contained within an administrative unit of a national state, they are not simply local.

The dominant narrative or mainstream account of globalization is a narrative of eviction. Key concepts in the dominant account of globalization suggest that place no longer matters. It is an account that privileges the capability for global transmission over the concentrations of built infrastructure that make transmission possible; that privileges information outputs over the workers producing those outputs, from specialists to secretaries; and that privileges the new transnational corporate culture over the multiplicity of cultural environments, including reterritorialized immigrant cultures, within which many of the "other" jobs of the global information economy take place. The focus is on the upper circuits of capital and with global power and powerful new capabilities.

The importance of accounts, such as these works of art, that make visible that which remains obscured and opaque in mainstream narratives is that they signal that powerlessness can be complex in that it can make history, and it can make the political. And this is so even if the actors are immobile and the work is place-centered. The partial

unbundling of the national through the insertion of the global in that national produces a rescaling of old hierarchies—running from the local, regional, and national, on to the global. Going to the next scale in terms of size is no longer how integration is achieved. The local now transacts directly with the global: the global installs itself in locals and the global is itself constituted through a multiplicity of locals. The distinction between the global and the local—notably in the assumption about the necessity of proximity in the constitution of the "local"—needs to be rethought. Ultimately, much of the artwork in question is disassembling the national as the dominant encasement for membership, security, subjectivity, legitimacy, and politics. In this process it points to new, possibly already emergent, assemblages of these critical dimensions.

BIO

Saskia Sassen is the Lynd Professor of Sociology and Member, The Committee on Global Thought, Columbia University (www.saskiasassen.com). Her recent books are *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton University Press, 2008), *A Sociology of Globalization* (W. W. Norton, 2007), the third fully updated *Cities in a World Economy* (Sage, 2006), the edited *Deciphering the Global* (Routledge, 2007), and the co-edited *Digital Formations: New Architectures for Global Order* (Princeton University Press, 2005). Her books are translated into twenty-one languages. She serves on several editorial boards and is an advisor to several international bodies.