

Bubble Tensions

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Contextualization

What to expect when discussing intersectional artistic practices and artistic research-based knowledge in 2026? As a basic question regarding the necessity to still strengthen the view on artistic and cultural matters, one must also take into account what Laura Cottingham (1998) documented in *Not for Sale*, a video compilation and restoration of feminist artwork from the 1970s. The subtitle (*Feminism and Art in the USA during the 1970s*) appears to highlight feminism as an identity-forming one-dimensional marker to artistic practice, but fails to grasp the intersectional value of the artistic, collaborative and multiple-authorship works which are portrayed. In the late 1990s, it would have been possible to already consider the multiple dimensions and perspectives of origin in which art works, such as Yoko Ono's soundtrack to the compilation were negotiated— at least in retrospect. Furthermore, the field of intersectionality could have been discussed in a far more inclusive manner, as this is one of the highly meritorious results of intersectionality discussions since the late 1980s.

Inclusion always demands for an admittance of non-academically built, non-canonized voices and views so as to allow public participation in a field which is often denied to non-academic trained readers and public in general. Unlike Cottingham's video work, Carmen Mörsch's opening to *Radical Admiration* (2018) and Lydia Hamann's and Kaj Osteroth's intersectional painting practice are the most intersectional reading experiences one might gain. As a highly acclaimed art historian and cultural educator, she chose the format of a love letter to formulate an introduction to the monograph on intersectional feminist, crip,

queer, racialized, collective, class critical painting practices. Her intended inclusion was what allowed the reading public to relate and create a further discourse on the topic which was contemporary.

Eight years after Mörsch's love letter to bad painting, and knowing of the importance of camp and relational aesthetics when writing and fabulating inclusion, the question is: how to write intersectional? The following text meanders wildly between post-colonial methods, such as those asked for by Spivak in *Righting Wrongs* (2008) and collective informal or vernacular knowledge communication as applied by Salman Rushdie in *Wizard of Oz* (1992). Both texts try to immerse themselves in an intersectional writing practice which allows affect driven perception as well as a contemporary split-view on intersectional personae and practices such as artistic-based research and its applied writing methods. This acts as an invitation to share intersectional and multiple viewpoints onto matters which allow the creation of new and shared cultural and artistic spaces. Please, read the following text as an invitation.

Perception

For a child growing up in a city center, it may not feel like they are supposed to represent social margins—that their own and their parents' migration histories would bind them to non-social centered members whose existence becomes a constant focus of academic research, autoethnographic ramblings and the identitarian political playground. Children may not be aware that they would be making up the social outskirts as per definition nor would they know that their biographies would become contested grounds. Neither are children aware of how to find allies and define those areas of tension and inclusion to build imagined communities. The question then is not thinking about bubble communalities but rather on how to blow bubbles and how to burst them.

Situated within artistic research, this text adopts an essayistic and associative form that combines theory, artistic practice, and cultural observation to approach intersectionality as a relational and unstable field of lived experience and uses the metaphor of the bubble to frame intersectionality as a fragile, shifting and relational practice that is lived, stretched and sometimes bursts under pressure (Crenshaw 2008). The children themselves are marked as contested ground through their physical positioning in certain power triangles: the city centre which classifies their locality and belonging through signifiers of class and migrants is the first marker to build up a source of tension which will define political and material perspectives. On top of this, society adds more variables including their racial and sexual/gender status, their psychological, physical and material abilities, and their religious and ideological predispositions. This is what will later be called a socio-political persona which is built through intersections of fields of supposed belonging. The question we must face when stating these seemingly hereditary and socially signifying traits and parameters is that we objectify and subalternise (Spivak: 1988:67) socio-political margins, taking away supposed fundamental rights. Spivak argues (1988:91) that especially persons of multiple intersectional markers, such as colour, religion, gender, class, and origin are most often denied self-defined and non-tokenised biographies.

Let us therefore take one more step back. In 1983 Benedict Anderson wrote in *Imagined Communities* that these markers which are set in contemporary class, gender, and anti-colonial struggles emerged through “the concept born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm” (Anderson 1983:7). We thus might accept the revolutionary as fundamental for understanding settings of signifiers which are intersectional — as one may hope that these signifiers are self-assigned and not presumed as tokenised weapons. Anderson continues that they are signs of “nation’s dream of being free. The gage and emblem

of this freedom is the sovereign state” (Anderson 1983:7). One might say the sovereign subject.

How could this revolutionary tool to create inclusive and non-marginalised spaces be abandoned in a colonial discourse as well as ongoing revolutionary and reformatory social struggles? Anderson thinks that sovereignty and self-determination are governed by the social development of certain factors such as increasing importance of mass vernacular literacy, need and wish to abolish the ideas of rule by divine right and the emergence of print capitalism, particularly “the convergence of capitalism and print technology... standardization of national calendars, clocks and language was embodied in books and the publication of daily newspapers” (Anderson 1983:32). Furthermore, we must not forget that all of this coincided in Europe and its dominions and colonies with the Industrial Revolution.

Hopping in and out of timelines — one step into our contemporary subplot: we might compare this easily with what is ongoing now: vernacular power is being used by tokenised academic positions and discourses to break an existing canon, such as through artistic storytelling, social media as hyper capitalist publishing and global news flashes along with a digital era which has left. Yes, this seems to be the downside of it — on the other hand, if we accept intersectionality as a weapon, it can be used to play, communicate, and fight together against common enemies, such as petro-masculinity and identitarian fascist policies? Here, intersectionality as a “weapon” is understood as a strategic and relational tool for forming alliances and enabling collective intervention (Davis 2015).

In her 2012 video work “Between the Waves”, Tejal Shah discussed this beautifully: a surreal setting in the militarised border region of the South Asian subcontinent, between India and Pakistan, becomes a dystopian, yet hopeful, futuristic setting. Elisabette Marobotto (2013) states: “a surreal universe

where unicorn women collect plastic and communicate through a mirror within a lunar setting. The film tackles issues such as sexuality, body, kinship and productiveness while blurring boundaries and categories.” Isn’t this what we expect when discussing intersectional possibilities?

Tejal Shah pointedly, campy and full of queer humour addresses exactly what the power of intersectionality is: The power of what Sara Ahmed (2023) would call being a feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2023). Contrarily, Ahmed explores the basic idea behind the fundamental intersectional discourse: breaking white academic privileged feminist teaching through including it in a more inclusive and hands-on movement, such as in Black Lives Matter in the US or Pink Sarees in India. Shah, conversely, demonstrates the power of artistic discourse by including not merely vernacular storytelling as one communication tool but also queer fabulations. To understand this more specifically, let us again look over our chronological shoulder and, along with Kimberle Crenshaw, make amends and create awareness about why formerly privileged white feminism became rigid and exclusive and why an inclusive and intersectional position was more than needed: in the second feminist wave, voices, especially Black Voices, were heard in the West, demanding entry and equality from their sisters. The question posed was — are colour and racism the only signifiers to fight against? The answer which many forget when still insisting on an identitarian and unilateral discourse is — yes. Sadly, they should look more closely: the realisation which the working-class movement had already found out at the beginning of the 20th century: South Asia’s fight for independence and the Irish and North English mill workers’ protest could be united and strengthened through standing together: colonised and working class regardless of gender, colour, or race. Remember the romantic press coverage around 1909’s round table conferences in London? MK Gandhi shaking hands with Manchester’s working poor. Neil Lazarus (2004:4) would label the media spectacle a network of traces (Lazarus 2004: 4).

Traces, when combined, create a univocal understanding bridging differences and creating a triangle of tension that tackles privileges. We are all aware that the alliances broke shortly after, but at least it was possible to create a climate of reforms and changes to bring down historic colonialism. Thus, we may realise that not every intersection is a stable moment and the bubble which defines our allies and biographies might be stretched and burst open. While looking at Kimberle Crenshaw and voices from the queer realm such as Judith Butler (1989) or Jack Halberstam (2018) —all speaking from a North-Western global perspective and taking into regard the eco-political and social stances biographies and practices bound to intersectional definitions in the margins might face — we must not forget that intersectionality is practiced and understood often quite differently and with different requirements in other regions of the world as well as depending on community settings, such as diasporas or clearly defined groups through governmentality.

As said before — the clearer cut these descriptions become inclusive. Jack Halberstam thus, from a trans* and perspective, urges all of us to always stay in the liquid form of intersectional interlocks: combining situations and discourse fields to show how different forms of oppression, such as racism, homophobia and transphobia, have relational effects (Halberstam 2018), and how power relations work in specific situations. Jack Halberstam advocates a trans* approach (with an asterisk) that breaks down the rigid meaning of identity categories and resists categorical codification.

Exemplification

The situations described by Jack Halberstam are obviously set in a queer time and place (2005) and fabulates beautiful possibilities which we all hope to achieve as a society together, enlarging the bubble to a sphere beyond the margins. Artists and cultural workers and thinkers such as Roshini Kempadoo even enriched these fabulations and blended in a diasporic, Caribbean, and South Asian understanding of what intersectionality means, especially her work “Virtual Exiles” (2000) which demonstrates the power of intersectionality and that such a practice must always be centred and borne from a communal understanding, a collective. Roshini Kempadoo states that it is necessary to tell collectively. Her artwork thus reflects on how media and artistic research enable us not only to illustrate possibilities of living intersectionally, but also that these stories are much larger and naturally go beyond what one might assume to be marginalised knowledge and everyday lives: “Stories, of digitally contributing our own version of what it means to step between two spaces at once. Two cultures, two senses of belonging, two countries we are familiar with. To visually describe this difference becomes an important inscription to everyday encounters and our writing of the past...” (2000).

Roshini Kempadoo thus exemplifies what Austrian trans-artist Hans Ashley Scheirl demonstrates in their work as well: by defining the margins as in-between spaces, such as Gayatri Spivak did in the 1980s; this might merely create new niches but not power. It enlarges knowledge within social pouches and pools but doesn’t allow those assigned to the margins to enter the mainstream social realm yet. Hans Ashley Scheirl therefore needs the public to accept their multitude of references, painterly fragments which refer to sex, gender, and economics. One of their latest work cycles, on display at Vienna’s financial hot spot, is titled “Libidinal Economy”, referring to Jean-François Lyotard. Hans Ashley Scheirl, just as Roshini Kempadoo, plays with the

hybridity and fluidity of the intersection they see themselves at. A critique towards eco-social governance which tries to paternalize gender politics and neo-liberal economics.

What we may learn from the abstracted take on intersectionality of Ashley Scheirl can also be seen as true in the discussion between Ritu Birla and Gayatri Spivak (2010) where both describe the abstract and fluid state as the state of in-between. Similarly, Zarina Bhimji in her video work “Out of Blue” (2002) also demonstrates the same possibility when elaborating on the intertwined interests of diasporic origin, refugee state, artistic attendance on a subject; simultaneously, on the other hand, focusing on the causes which led to her media discourse on the South Asian genocide in Uganda in 1972. “Out of blue” is an abstract yet very palpable enlightenment on how the matrix of domination works which tries to suppress intersectional empowerment: blind and one-eyed identitarian fascist violence which does not deal with the larger picture and considers all variables which enabled material greed and dominance in the first place. Even though more than twenty years old, the work sparks contemporary significance in the urgency created through totalitarian regimes worldwide. We may also learn from positions such as *Prickly Paper*, published by anarchists Chen Yifei and Ou Feihong who use techniques of fabulation and the intersectionality of actual and artistic languages in their publications and performances to demonstrate a chronological need for freedom, liberation, and intersectional social engagement while intensely and intelligently using the showcasing on the one hand of their various collectives. The spaces they have made accessible in galleries, living rooms, educational institutions, and in public always allow a multitude of voices and discourses. Thus, their work is not merely an answer to (Black) male dominated and white feminist discourses but offers an innate understanding about how collectivism and individual positions as economic and socio-political identities result in a specific kind of exclusion and privilege.

My absolute favourite is the narration of Chen Yifei which masterfully unfolds how modernism, anarchy and the production of knowledge accumulate in utter liberation. He uses police documentation on anarchists at the beginning of the 20th century in East and Southeast Asia, as well as Europe to unfold graphically but also as imagined gossip and fabulated realities. His wood block printed covers and risograph interior aesthetic of the artist zines further expands to contemporary dissident stories, be it in Iran, China, or Palestine. His fearless and sharp curious approach is what I would see as the true power against the abuse within the intersectional discourse which can only culminate in boring oppression olympics which we witness today in the downfall of many grass root and community movements in Europe, especially in the art world. By giving in to the temptation of strengthening one stress point within the tension triangle which sets up real intersectionality, identitarian weakness ends up supporting only misogynist, conservative and capitalist regimes.

Want a favourite popular late sample which is just as clever as Chen Yifei? Look at the Super Bowl show by Bad Bunny, with his ally Lady Gaga, which later went viral by South Asians linking into the beats and rhythm by Bhangra moves. Bad Bunny invited the major global population in by calling out the largely memed *Latino Belt* (2020). No, we don't have to love bomb as an easy way out and cozy ourselves into unity. Bad Bunny, just as Siddharta Lokhandi from Hopscotch Reading Room (Berlin), sees intersectionality as something very much linked to inclusion and civil disobedience. Siddharta Lokhandi thus describes his work with Hopscotch Reading Room as creating "a space for dissent. It's a space for minoritarian discourse, which is ultimately what *Wasafiri* is within the larger literary culture of England" (2026). We must take this note from Siddharta Lokhandi with a big queer diasporic twinkling eye: as he loves, administers and is a dealer in vernacular knowledge, a canon which is built on multiple authorships and breaks linguistic political rules to open new shared spaces such as the use of the phrase vernacular.

He no longer uses it as a derogatory term as in the 19th century arts and crafts movement to downplay ethnic and indigenous knowledge and aesthetics to eclectic artisanal practices. No, Siddharta Lokhandi uses the phrase to highlight the beauty to make voices heard, including the Asian underground (Singh: 1997).

Jumping through queer and diverse timely loopholes, we might conclude that intersectionality as such is an artistic practice, a research tool, and a lived everyday which creates a fairer society, considering an individual or communal reality, rather than focusing on a single characteristic strain, allowing richness to bloom. It builds allyships without falsely assuming annexation of cultural spheres on the one hand and on the other allowing diverse co-authorship to create an anti-capitalist and appreciative, respectful social structure which no longer requires the definition of ostracized margins or squeezed in in-betweens but invites multifarious spatial arrangements to be visited and shared equally. Yes, it is a utopian imagination, but with supporting witnesses and active allies such as informal gardeners in public urban spaces, eco-feminists who practice civil disobedience by supporting queer pride participants through cycle blockades, universities harbouring refugees and artists using ornaments for strengthening democratic rights — I still believe in the utopia of intersectionality to happen right at my doorstep tomorrow, soap bubbles passing by in all colours my tired brain can imagine.

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