

Tracing the dissemination of images of imperialism(s) in the works of  
Nanna Debois Buhl, The Raqs Media Collective and Teresa Margolles

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“You can only read against the grain if misfits in the text signal the way” (Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, In Other Worlds, p. 290)

The images of colonialisms and their spectacles of empire are subject to dissemination. When these images become subject to postcolonial narratives they make visible the limits of colonialism. The inequalities become apparent in each image’s context through the dissemination of images of empire<sup>1</sup> over time. (Re)presentations of *self* become altered by making *other* different and differing subjectivities. Various imperialisms have sought and continue to seek censoring of some of the contexts in which certain images of empire can be seen. Examples include the U.S.’ censoring of images of torture and abuse at C.I.A. black sites<sup>2</sup>, China’s censoring of almost any dissent<sup>3</sup>, and the silencing of many issues of corporate abuse by multinational media corporations. As the U.S. continues wars of occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan while slyly supporting Israel’s occupation of Palestinian held territory, the images offered by Nanna Debois Buhl, the Raqs Media Collective and Teresa Margolles serve as reminders that the specter of empire becomes that of failure over time. To make visible the limits of empire involves tracing the seams of imperialism that empire tries to make invisible. Buhl, Raqs and Margolles’s works locate the alteration of images of colonialism and violence imperialism inflicts on (a) subject(s) through time and offers a way to trace the dissemination of various imperialism(s).

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<sup>1</sup> By empire I mean the occlusion of different meanings of subjectivity.

<sup>2</sup> A “black site” refers to a site wherein the United States disavows any visibility given to its official power at a host location.

<sup>3</sup> This includes and not exclusively the suppression of records of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989

Nanna Debois Buhl<sup>4</sup> is an artist in New York who traces the remnants of Danish colonial history through the mapping of its different terrains in order to make sensible the (in)determinate relations between the past and the present. Formed in 1992, The Raqs Media Collective<sup>5</sup> is based in Delhi, India, where they make visible (post)modernism's<sup>6</sup> ambivalence to nomadic situations. Working in Mexico City, Teresa Margolles<sup>7</sup> is an artist who uses the bodies of the victims of violence from drug cartels to make the costs of neoliberal ideology visible.

Spectacles of imperialism are invisible in the absence of a discourse about imperialism. The censoring of the past is part of the sanctioning of ignorance towards historical contingency. Buhl, Raqs and Margolles trace where the sanctioned invisibility of spectacles of imperialism becomes visible. Yet, such (re)presentations always already imply an *othering* that occludes becoming (an)*other* subject despite efforts to make visible the colonial subject of the subaltern<sup>8</sup>. And where sensibilities are not inscribed in self-representation becomes a subaltern site.

To use postcolonial theory to trace the criticality of the works of Buhl, Raqs and Margolles is not to say that such works are postcolonial. These artists are part of institutions of contemporary art that remain the object of biennials, exhibitions, collections and internet traffic, each of which functions to make sensible some subjectivities and not others. However, what is intriguing in the case that these works are art is the indeterminacy that such a category lends to their semiotics. Nevertheless, as in the case of Raqs, which receives funding from various European and U.S. institutions while being based in Delhi, who funds whom reveals inequalities in self-representation. Despite these inequalities of responsibility, the works of Buhl, Raqs and Margolles offer subjectivities that, by making them sensible, disrupt the notions of consensus that may inscribe what we deem politically possible. Their works'

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<sup>4</sup> b. 1975, Aarhus, Denmark

<sup>5</sup> Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabrata Sengupta

<sup>6</sup> By (post)modernism I mean the ideologies that attempt to give form to (a) teleological rupture(s) and repetition(s) to historicity.

<sup>7</sup> b. 1963, Culiacán, Sinaloa

<sup>8</sup> The subaltern is the colonial subject who cannot speak for their self. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes "[b]y 'subaltern' I mean those removed from lines of social mobility" (Spivak, Gayatri, *Other Asias*, p. 23)

ability to make visible subjectivities that might otherwise go without a name, an image and a story alter what we could consider politically possible even if only that these subjectivities bring into question our own subjectivity.

In the 2009 *Whitney ISP Studio Exhibition*, shown at Art in General in New York, a work by Buhl called *Incredible Creature* (figs. 1 and 2) features a projector projecting text onto a triptych of different wallpapers. The wallpapering features images that partially map the colonial history of Denmark. On the left-hand side is an image of a series of buildings. Two of these buildings served as warehouses in Copenhagen and bear names referring to when they housed The Royal Greenland Trade and the Danish West India Companies. The middle image features a giant sea serpent with a black background that refers to when a Christian missionary traveled in 1791 to Greenland to search for descendants of Vikings but found a “giant sea serpent” instead, whereupon he built a mission among the local Inuit communities. An image on the right-hand side features wallpaper with Caribbean guava fruit patterning that, according to a text on Buhl’s website<sup>9</sup>, she found in the “King’s Room” in the Danish West India Company building. Onto this image projects a text about the coffee, sugar, rum, seal and whale bone trades that happened throughout the West Indies, Greenland and Denmark. The text tells of the building’s current function as a sculpture house and renovated apartments with harbor views. The mannequin makes the image appear as a comic strip, the hat a clue to the contemporary parody of transatlantic trade. One of the lines of the text reads “Traces of the colonies turned into a wallpaper pattern” (Buhl, Nanna: [http://www.nannadeboisbuhl.net/projects/incredible\\_creature/index.html](http://www.nannadeboisbuhl.net/projects/incredible_creature/index.html)). That Buhl uses wallpaper with images of colonial history in Denmark seems to give the work a sardonic indebtedness to the history it depicts. This maneuver erases the “there” and “then” opposition to the “here” and “now,” an opposition that the documentary form otherwise proposes. This erasure is what has been described as the two-way encountering of Buhl’s work (Hoegsberg, Milena, curatorial statement for “NANNA DEBOIS BUHL: Looking for Donkeys”: [http://saag.ca/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=621&Itemid=43](http://saag.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=621&Itemid=43)).

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nannadeboisbuhl.net>

In deconstructing the documentary form that much of Buhl's work uses, she makes visible the generalities in specifics and *vice versa* that the positivistic readings ascribed to the documentary form fails to do. Instead of presenting images and text as self-evident facts to an anterior event, the work locates its meaning through its dissemination of generalities between one wallpaper and another wallpaper and between one (con)text and another (con)text. The work thus erases the opposition between the Truth and falsity of an image as positivistic representation by using mimicry to show artifice in both the image of the wallpaper in the "King's Room" and the wallpaper that features such an image in the gallery at Art in General.

Figs. 1 and 2



Nanna Debois Buhl  
*Incredible Creature*, 2009  
 Wallpaper with projected text

4 minutes (looping)  
 148 x 48 cm.  
 (Photo: Kasper Akhøj)

In *Looking for Donkeys* (figs. 3-12), a work shown in 2008 at *Enter*, an exhibition at Kunsthallen Brandts in Odense, Denmark and in the *2009 Whitney ISP Studio Exhibition*, Buhl traces the remnants of Danish colonial history on the islands of St. Croix, St. John and St. Thomas. Denmark sold the islands to the U.S. in 1917 when it became known as the U.S. Virgin Islands. Denmark had brought donkeys to the islands during the Eighteenth Century to work on the sugar plantations. Today, the donkeys roam the islands. A soundtrack made in collaboration with Jonny Farrow and Pejk Malinovski and a voice-over by Naja Marie Aidt plays during the video.

*Looking for Donkeys* maps a trajectory from (Danish) colonialism to (U.S) colonialism. The transition between occupiers produces a different (post)colonial situation. The purpose for the islands has been altered in order that the donkeys, once regarded as commodities in the sugar trade, have become either a nuisance or a spectacle. After returning to Denmark from the U.S. Virgin Islands, Buhl made *Incredible Creature*. The two works differ in that *Looking for Donkeys* appears to have a documentary format whereas *Incredible Creature* differs such a format for one that makes the encounter a supposed two-way between colonial history in Denmark and the spectator in the art institution in New York.

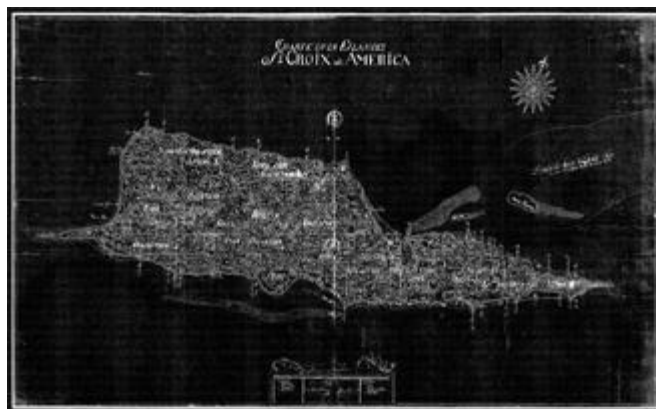
Figs 3-12



Nanna Debois Buhl  
*Looking for Donkeys*, 2009  
 Dual screen video installation  
 16mm film transferred to DVD  
 14 minutes  
 Stereo sound  
 Color  
 English voice over  
 Sound in collaboration with  
 Jonny Farrow and Pejk Malinovski  
 Voice over: Naja Marie Aidt

Much of Buhl's work deals with mapping counter images to the cartographies inscribed by imperialism using such maps as locations for traversing a terrain. It is a reversal of the arbitrary colonial mapping of boundaries meant to define (a) nation-state(s). In 2008 Buhl installed a work at the *Socle du Monde Biennial* at the Herning Art Museum in Denmark called *The Mapmaker* (figs. 13-16), 2008, a work in which she seeks to find the first mapping of the island of St. Croix that the Danish colonial administration had ordered. The order sent Colonel Johann Cronenberg to the island in 1945. A few years later Johann von Jægersberg was sent to assist Cronenberg. Cronenberg was arrested and expelled in 1950 for having an affair with a married woman (Buhl, Nanna: <http://www.nannadeboisbuhl.net/projects/mapmaker/index.html>). Jægersberg finished the map and three months later died. Although the map had more details than any previous Danish colonial map, it lost some of its significance after the abolition of slavery. To map the mapping of the Danish colonial map of St. Croix, Buhl traces the psychobiographies of the mapmakers. Buhl turns the photo of an expedition on the island of St. Croix in 1911 into a panoramic wall tapestry and the image of the map of St. Croix into a floor carpet. Buhl chose the map of St. Croix since it seemingly faded from memory although it had been implemental to Danish colonial history. Buhl reverses the colonial administration's orders by mapping the making of the map of St. Croix.

Figs. 13-16



Nanna Debois Buhl

*The Mapmaker*

Installation (2008)

constituting of:

Floor carpet 4 x 6 m.

Wall tapestry 4 x 6 m.

Video with text only (Danish / English version)

Soundtrack with field recordings of frogs and cicadas played at low volume (looping)

Created in collaboration with Ege Carpets

Historicizing modernity erases the opposition between past and present. The task becomes one of tracing the (dis)locations of subjectivities in order to make visible the seams of where empire's self (re)presentation has occluded the possibility of (an)other location(s) through its ambivalence to regional<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Geneological deconstruction is what sustains anti-ethnic regionalism and shifts gears from the management of ethnicity to the equitable management of capital and the sources of capital. As long as class-mobile metropolitan

differences. The Raqs Media Collective attempts to make visible these ambivalences through a media practice that disseminates images of nomadic subjects via art institutions throughout various transnational regions.

For a definition of Raqs: “[i]t is a word in Persian, Arabic and Urdu and means the state that "whirling dervishes" enter into when they whirl. It is also a word used for dance... Raqs could be an acronym, standing for 'rarely asked questions'”... (Cornelia Sollfrank and Raqs Media Collective conversation, “The Situation is Tense but under Control,”<http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/conversations2.html>).

Raqs receives and/or received funding from the Danish government’s development aid program, the Daniel Langlois Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and from Hivos. Raqs also partnered with De Waag (Society for Old and New Media) in Amsterdam to operate an exchange program. Raqs admits that “unfortunately [waste] can be the standard” among NGO funding, but, that it doesn’t have to waste such funding (*ibid*). Raq’s claim to exceptionality with the standards of NGOs and the Danish government makes sense considering that much of their work deals with nomadism to counter the effects of disaster-relief that sustains many of the NGOs:

We think, however, that nomadism is not a one-off singular movement from one location to another. It requires regularities, and returns. This is the difference between the nomad and the migrant. The nomad walks the same paths between places, the migrant leaves one place for another... The between-ness of the first movement and the finality of the second departure enclose between them a world of a difference. In fact, this difference may be what we are struggling to define as the distinction between translocality and the hegemonic form of

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migrancy is its only vehicle, by its very dynamic it will work against preparation for it in subalternity... Anti-ethnic, nationalism-critical regionalism tangles with the closest thing to universalism that the primate world knows – reproductive heteronormativity (Spivak, Gayatri, *Other Asias*, p. 127).



globalization (Steve Dietz, Guna Nadarajan, Raqs Media Collective and Yukiko Shikata emailing, “Translocations,” <http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/conversations1.html>).

Raqs’s claim to exceptionality does not seem to consider that many of the NGOs that finance some of its projects prioritize technological advancement at the expense of politics and that many of Raqs’s works often use scientific tropes that are indebted to a belief in technological answers to issues of inequality that have become the mantra of technocrats, many of whom occupy positions in NGOs. Yet, despite problems with media as metaphors for utopian society, some of Raqs’s works make visible that NGO’s are, partially, responsible for the increasing privatization of the economy as a result of neoliberalism.

In 2007, Raq’s installed *Timebook* (figs. 17-20) at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, PA. *Timebook* refers to the counting of workers’ hours spent in the factory. *Timebook* uses materials related to the steel industry in Pittsburgh to (re)construct some remnants of its past. A sheet of stainless steel hangs from the ceiling with the image of a sculpture made by a steel worker silk screened on one side in orange. Defunct clocks point with their hands to the number 1-9-8-6, the year in which many steel mills in the area closed. A telephone pole rest at a 60 degree angle, mounted from the floor to a rafter in the ceiling. Windows contain images of ductwork and rust stains that are silk-screened on panes of glass. What seems most interesting in *Timebook* is the appropriation of an image of a sculpture made by a steel worker. The silkscreen of the sculpture by an anonymous steel worker references the time that a book cannot log and that records of wage-labor cannot tell.

Figs. 17-20



Raqs Media Collective

*Timebook*, 2007

Installation with telephone pole, video projections, enamel screen print on stainless steel, enamel screen prints on acrylic, digital ink-jet on galvanized steel, digital screen, clocks, fiberglass insulation, paint.  
<http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/timebook.html>

Raqs focuses on the remnants of travel in *There has been a change of plan* (fig. 21), 2007. *There has been a change of plan* is a cover-image for *An(other) publication* edited by Renée Ridgway and Katarina Zdjelar (Piet Zwart Institute and Revolver Books). For a description of the project:

Twelve writers were invited to contribute a text on this [otherness] subject, each writing a preface to a possible book around the 'other.' Together, these prefaces trace different identifications and applications of the term, such as collaboration, love, aesthetics, institutional critique and globalisation. In addition, 82 artists were invited to submit a cover for this book and they, in turn, invited another to contribute an image for a cover. Each compilation of texts is framed by one single cover image, 164 in total; and from each different variant of the book only 7 copies exist. The 'other' referred to in this book thus keeps shifting from one possible/impossible other to the next, encouraging a mutation from the initial concept of otherness into 'anotherness' (Ridgway, Rinée, <http://reneideridgway.net/latest-projects/>).

The image Raqs submitted shows a gutted commercial airplane in a field with several other defunct airplanes. The airplane in the foreground rests on wooden planks, becoming a monumental piece of architecture. The image is seen as if from the perspective of the nomad, returning to the space of abandonment and decay. Remnants of industrial travel show the position of the migrant cosmopolitan also as leaving areas of abandonment and decay.

Fig. 21



Raqs Media Collective

*There has been a change of plan*, 2007

a cover-image among many other cover-images for the *An(other) Publication*, a publication project by Renée Ridgway and Katarina Zdjelar in collaboration with the Piet Zwart Institute and Revolver Books, Archiv für aktuelle Kunst.

In 2007, Raqs exhibited *The Wherehouse* (figs. 22 and 23) in the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels. The work takes abandoned objects from the streets of Brussels and posits them throughout the Palais des Beaux-Arts. Raqs mentions on its website on a webpage<sup>11</sup> about *The Wherehouse* that many immigrants live in conditions of detention. Each object is tagged with an annotation about the state(lessness) of immigrants in Europe who face racism and xenophobia in their respective locations. *The Wherehouse* practices rescension, a critical revising of text and image that makes visible subjectivities that are occluded from representation under the domain of empire. It is not surprising that the versions of *The Wherehouse* that appeared in October 2004 – January 2005 at the Taipei Biennial and in May – June 2004 at the Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels have the titles *Rescension 02* and *Rescension 01*.

Figs. 22 and 23



Raqs Media Collective

*Rescension 01: Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels*, 6 May - 6 June 2004

Installation with 2 video projections, found objects, uniquely produced photo-books overlaid by handwritten notes, text panels, soundscape, spoken performance, photographs and web page:

[www.the-warehouse.net](http://www.the-warehouse.net)

<sup>11</sup> Raqs Media Collective: <http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/warehouse.html>

Whereas Raqs uses objects to serve as metaphors for the body of immigrants, Margolles literally uses the bodies of anonymous victims of the transnational drug trade. The transnational drug trade supports the cartels working in Mexico that perform thousands of drug-related executions. Teresa makes visible the nameless, faceless bodies of drug cartel victims that appear in the streets of Mexico through her *rescension* of the contemporary art context.

Margolles's work has been traced to that of Santiago Sierra. Both have been described as "controversial artists" working in Mexico and both use bodies in their work of, often, laborers and the economically deprived.<sup>12</sup> Yet, Margolles's work differs from Santiago Sierra's work (figs. 24 and 25) in that she is not attempting to make invisible the identities of those whom she represents. Those whom she represents are identified as those that have been made nameless and faceless in the eyes of empire. Margolles attempts to give a face and a name to the anonymous. She is not, in the case of Sierra, attempting to make anonymous those who have a name and a face.

Figs. 24 and 25



Santiago Sierra  
*Burial of ten workers*, 2010  
 Calambrone, Italy  
[http://www.santiago-sierra.com/201001\\_1024.php](http://www.santiago-sierra.com/201001_1024.php)

<sup>12</sup> Margolles, Teresa, "Santiago Sierra," *BOMB*, issue 86, Winter 2004: <http://bombsite.com/issues/86/articles/2606>

In the 2009 Venice Biennale, Margolles exhibited *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?* (*What else could we talk about?*) (figs. 26-30) in the Mexican Pavilion. In *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?*, Teresa invited relatives of those killed in narco executions—whose blood she mixes in a solution of mud and water—from the Sinaloa area to mop the floor of the Sixteenth Century Palazzo Rota-Ivancich. Teresa also installed *Bandera*, a work in which flags stained in the execution victims' blood fly from a balcony (during the 1990s Teresa participated in the SEMEFO [*Servicio Medico Forense* - Forensic Medical Services]). A film of dried blood with mud accumulates from the relatives' mopping of the floor in *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?*. Their labor contaminates the space with the blood transported from sites in Sinaloa. This makes apparent the implications of international drug trade that calls into question the supposed security of the Mexican nation-state, especially considering a neo-liberal trade with markets both within and beyond Mexico's territorial boundaries.

Figs. 26-30



*Bandera (Flag)*, 2009, Fabric dyed with blood collected from executions on the north border of Mexico. Courtesy of the artist.

<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/the-market/2009-06-09/what-else-could-we-speak-about-teresa-margolles-at-the-mexican-pavilion/>



*¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? (What else could we talk about?)*

<http://angelfloresjr.multiply.com/journal/item/2496>



*¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? (What else could we talk about?)*

<http://angelfloresjr.multiply.com/journal/item/2496>

The transporting of the victims' relatives represents a reversal of the metropolitan migrant position as a privileged subject, simultaneously dissimulating the genealogical (il)legitimacy of the Mexican nation-state. The deterritorialization of subjects by way of neoliberal ideology becomes re-territorialized as a hybrid between states. *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?* proposes a non-belonging to a single nation since the body to which the work belongs becomes literally separated from any genealogical origin by geographical distance.

In *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?*, the relationship between the victims of narco execution and their relatives who mop the floor with their blood imagines the victims of capitalist/imperialist violence who might otherwise go without a face. Labor and death contaminate the space of the *Venice Biennale* by way of transporting bodies of victims of neoliberal ideology across distances.

In *En el aire*, (*In the air*) (fig. 31), 2003, Teresa uses disinfected water from a morgue that had been used to clean dead bodies prior to their autopsy to blow bubbles in the main hall of a museum. Labor gallery, a gallery based in Mexico City that represents Teresa, reads on its webpage, “[t]he difference between the soap bubble before and after the information as to the water’s origin is the difference between the living body and the dead one” (Labor Gallery, statement for *En el Aire*: [http://www.labor.org.mx/artistas.obras.detalle.php?pageNum\\_obras=6&id=6&obra=68](http://www.labor.org.mx/artistas.obras.detalle.php?pageNum_obras=6&id=6&obra=68)). The work erases the opposition between life and death. The sanitizing quality that usually is assumed by blowing bubbles becomes one of decay as well. Paul Ruiz writes that Teresa is “[i]nterested in the “political life” of dead bodies, Margolles strives to dignify the indigents – in many cases, exploited alive, immediately forgotten as they die – found in the morgue and nameless victims of Mexico’s disturbingly quotidian violence while questioning the social and economic conditions that render them invisible (and their deaths, tolerable)” (Martinez, Raul, “What Else Could We Speak About?: Teresa Margolles at the Mexican Pavillion”: <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/the-market/2009-06-09/what-else-could-we-speak-about-teresa-margolles-at-the-mexican-pavilion/>).



Fig. 31



*En el aire, (In the air), 2003*

Bubbles made with water of the morgue that was used to wash the corpses before the autopsy

I am writing this text to elaborate a trajectory of works by Nanna, Raqs and Teresa that inscribe a sensibility through the dissemination of imperialisms. In such a case, these works put under erasure other sensibilities that have already been inscribed in notions of art's autonomy.

The works by Nanna, Raqs and Teresa do not reorder the world for a particular end. They do not tell of how to end empire. They do not show the way to salvation. For this reason, their indifference to any end of politics by their indeterminacy counters the subject-object of empire. Such indeterminacy counters the determinacy of empire's singular claim to order. Paradoxically, the indifference of art to empire's omnipresent image is part of an interested and strategic means for dissenting from the consensus that tyrannizes the colonial subject. The indifference of art to a determinate meaning provides a space where the differing and different subjectivities confronts empire with its inability to order things according to a single rule. The differing and different subjectivities produced by art disorders things by having no definitive meaning.

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