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**Articulating the Contemporary? Collaborative Aesthetics and Indigenous Knowledge in Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad's Field of Sight (2013-ongoing)**

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Articulating the  
Contemporary?  
Collaborative aesthetics  
and indigenous knowledge  
in Gauri Gill and  
Rajesh Vangad's *Field of  
Sight* (2013-ongoing)

by

FREYA SCHWACHENWALD



This paper takes a critical stance towards the propagation of particular ‘alternative’ forms of knowledge which are, first, based on collaborative aesthetic practice and, second, on the inclusion of indigenous cosmologies. This critique does not mean to play down the urgency to rethink our relations to our lived world with regards to capital-driven environmental destruction and neo-colonial violence against indigenous communities world-wide. Examining the particular case of a politically engaged, artistic collaboration on indigenous knowledge – Gauri Gill’s and Rajesh Vangad’s *Fields of Sight* (2013-ongoing) – allows us to question the vocabularies of ‘alternative knowledges’ which have permeated recent scholarship on political ecologies, the anthropocene and contemporary art. By combining existing scholarship on collaborative artistic practice, political art and knowledge production, the hope here is to critically reflect on simplistic solutions to the persistence of epistemological violence and marginalization.

In the first part, this paper will argue that the disruptive interpretation of *Fields of Sight*, as a proposition of new visual epistemologies, is entangled with certain assumptions on the role of photographic representation and its construction of space, time and subjectivity. Building on this, the second part will assess in which ways *Fields of Sight* as a collaborative practice is both

asymmetrical and emancipating. Here, the contextualization of the writings on Vangad’s Warli paintings and Gill’s collaborative photographic practice will unfold the multiple layers through which their work is oscillating between local, national and global scales. The third part will then conclude with an investigation into strategies of collaborative instability of meaning and of linkages to the vernacular that might offer alternatives to static art conceptions and practices. All three parts of the paper build on previous research on collaborative artistic practices on the one hand, and on indigenous knowledge production on the other. The combination of art history with reflections on intellectual and public history, as they are applied in this paper, will enable an expansion of critical reflection on alternative knowledge production, beyond the particular case study of *Fields of Sight*.

If we believe a large number of ambitious, critical scholarship on contemporary art, the politically engaged and collaborative artwork is the preferred path to salvation from the predicaments of epistemological, (neo-)colonial violence and environmental destruction.<sup>1</sup> Taking Jacques Rancière’s writings on the “distribution of the sensible” as

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Collection Documents Sur l’art (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002); Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Acticism and Agonistic Spaces,” *Art & Research* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 1–5; T.J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

its starting point, this scholarship foregrounds art's ability to contest dominant structures of visibility and invisibility.<sup>2</sup> Art, this argument goes, proposes alternative ways of seeing, perceiving and knowing. It allows us to shift ontologies of time and contemporaneity, of definitions of the human and other-than-human and of legitimate and disqualified knowledge. In this understanding, art as "intersectional politics of aesthetics" draws attention to processes of injustice and violence on the one hand, and productively proposes political, social and ontological alternatives on the other.<sup>3</sup> These redemptive narratives of including 'alternative' forms of knowledge production resonate with larger efforts within the humanities and social sciences to critically reflect on the legacies of the European Enlightenment and the ensuing catastrophes of colonialism.<sup>4</sup> Within these narratives, one can observe a particular focus on the cosmologies and epistemologies of indigenous communities. Art as an experimental, collaborative and speculative form of knowledge production seems to have gained prevalence as a means of political activism for marginalized

groups.<sup>5</sup> This larger trend resonates through academic disciplines from art history to anthropology. Also, an increasing number of internationally established artists cooperate with a variety of communities in order to render their concerns visible.<sup>6</sup> But as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Young remind us, the reconciliatory and reparative efforts initiated by hegemonic agents and institutions to alleviate the injustices of colonialization have a long-standing history. Additionally, they are closely entangled with efforts to maintain the hegemonic status quo through demonstrations of benevolence and inclusion, whilst simultaneously consolidating essentialist assumptions of marginalized groups and individuals.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore necessary to critically pause and reflect on the role of collaborative art as a practice of decolonization. This paper understands art as a "mode of world-making":<sup>8</sup> a network of institutions and agents with asymmetric

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- 2 Jacques Rancière, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics," in *Communities of Sense. Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Beth Hinderliter (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 31–50.
- 3 Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, 13.
- 4 See for example Jessica L. Horton, "Indigenous Artists against the Anthropocene," *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (2017): 50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2017.1367192>.

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- 5 Laura Hall, "My Mother's Garden: Aesthetics, Indigenous Renewal, and Creativity," in *Art in the Anthropocene. Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 283–92; Zoe Todd, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene," in *Art in the Anthropocene. Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 241–45.
- 6 Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, 20.
- 7 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Young, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 3.
- 8 Monica Juneja, "'A Very Civil Idea...': Art History, Transculturation, and World-Making - With and Beyond the Nation," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 81 (2018): 463.

power relations that structures our perceived realities, that connects people, objects, ideas and markets.

Previous discussions of Gauri Gill's and Rajesh Vangad's series *Fields of Sight* accord the series the revolutionary and redemptive function of decolonizing both artistic practices and knowledge production. Feminist scholar Inderpal Grewal, for example, calls the project "a new language for art practices that address the politics and aesthetics of environmental destruction".<sup>9</sup>

*Fields of Sight* consists of a growing number of monochrome photographs (still being created) first taken by Gill and inscribed with black drawings by Vangad. The photographs are all taken in and around Vangad's native village Dahanu in the Thane District of Maharashtra, India. Vangad describes himself as a Warli painter. His artworks are being exhibited and sold under this category in the growing international market for indigenous, tribal or – in the case of India – Adivasi art.<sup>10</sup> Conventionally, his category is either considered separately from the realms of 'global'

contemporary art, or added in an inclusionary manner. The inclusion of formerly marginalized artists and their works into the canon of 'global' or 'world' art is problematic, because, too often, it revives an epistemological vocabulary of modernist and primitivist ideologies.<sup>11</sup> It becomes clear that in previous discussions of *Fields of Sight*, but also in other works of Gill and Vangad, certain modalities of the power of art as a revelatory medium have been assumed without questioning. Therefore, this paper searches to critically examine the demands that are made toward *Fields of Sight* as a site of re-articulation of vision and the (in-)visible: what is it, exactly, that is made visible? What remains unseen in the act of collaboration and representation? If we understand *Fields of Sight* as an articulation of art's ability to "challenge the existing distribution of the real and the fictional", as Rancière suggests, where do we position the collaborating artists?<sup>12</sup> If we proceed to understand art as constitutive of a certain vision of the world, who is seeing and speaking through it? And what implications do these reflections have on the decolonizing of academic and artistic practice?

9 Inderpal Grewal, "Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad: Fields of Sight," *The Trans-Asia Photography Review* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2015), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0005.205>.

10 See Vangad's self-description on his website, "Rajesh Vangad," Rajesh Vangad, accessed June 20, 2018, <http://vangad-adiyuva.blogspot.com/>; Jyotindra Jain, "Crossing Borders: Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists in India," in *Indian Painting: The Lesser-Known Traditions*, ed. Anna Libera Dallapiccola, n.d.; Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, 8; Nirmal Sengupta, "Reappraising Tribal Movements-II: Legitimization and Spread," *Economic and Political Weekly of India*, May 14, 1988, 1003–5.

11 See for example Hans Belting's definition of "global art" or the concept of the critically received 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Pompidou Hans Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art. A Critical Estimate," accessed July 13, 2018, [http://rae.com.pt/Belting\\_\\_Contemporary\\_Art\\_as\\_Global\\_Art.pdf](http://rae.com.pt/Belting__Contemporary_Art_as_Global_Art.pdf); Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Jean-Hubert Martin, "Interview," *Third Text* 3, no. 6 (January 3, 1989): 19–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528828908576210>.

12 Rancière, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics," 49.

In previous research, Vangad and Gill are repeatedly presented as having emerged from disparate, even opposite artistic fields. Additionally, their collaboration is evaluated as a revelatory sensorial and perceptual practice through the combination of supposedly unrelated methods of artistic expression: photography on the one hand and indigenous Warli painting on the other. For instance, Grewal argues for the contemporaneity of urban and rural narratives in the collaboration of Vangad and Gilly.<sup>13</sup> Some of the claims asserted in the analysis of Grewal and others are indeed relevant to understanding the collaborative practices of meaning production operating in *Fields of Sight*.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, simply understanding the series as a revolutionary and revelatory expression of the contemporaneity of creative indigenous articulation risks leading into an epistemological and

ideological dead end. While *Fields of Sight*, along with the rest of Gill's oeuvre, has been celebrated as an example of "Another Way of Seeing"<sup>15</sup> through dialogical and collaborative artistic practice, this euphoria must be critically examined: the call for 'new' methods of visual practice and knowledge production through the mobilization of 'traditional', 'alternative' or 'indigenous' ways of seeing runs risks once again reifying an essentializing definition of the indigenous as modernity's 'Other'. As Sangeeta Kamat critically notes on tribal movements in the Thane District, in an "emergent global context [...] indigenous/tribal culture as a universal type finds new relevance as a mirror for the critique of metropolitan modernity".<sup>16</sup>

To avoid replacing old universalisms with what appear to be new ones, it seems critical to mobilize Grant Kester's question: to what extent an artwork such as *Fields of Sight* "remains mindful of the violence of community and of representation itself."<sup>17</sup> Taking *Fields of Sight* as a critique of modern ways of seeing and representing the world through an alternative, indigenous world view, in which human and nature, present and past are co-present and co-relating,

13 Grewal, "Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad: Fields of Sight."

14 Rashmi Meenakshi Viswanathan, for instance, proposes to understand the series as a new "architecture of memory", arguing for the multivalent constructions of space through the collaboration. Sociologist and art historian Stuti Kakar emphasizes that the series proposes "new ways of viewing the world" from the perspective of the "Global South". The centrality of the metaphor of vision also becomes evident in Michael Collins discussion of the series which is titled "Another Way of Seeing". Rashmi Meenakshi Viswanathan, "An Architecture of Memory," *Third Text*, 2017, <http://www.thirdtext.org/architecture-memory>; Stuti Kakar, "Fields of Sight: Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad," *OpenDemocracy*, February 8, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/fields-of-sight-gauri-gill-and-rajesh-vangad/>; Michael Collins, Gauri Gill, and Rajesh Vangad, "Another Way of Seeing," *Granta Magazine*, July 3, 2015, <https://granta.com/another-way-of-seeing/>.

15 Collins, Gill, and Vangad, "Another Way of Seeing."

16 Sangeeta Kamat, "Anthropology and Global Capital. Rediscovering the Noble Savage," *Cultural Dynamics* 13, no. 1 (January 3, 2001): 31.

17 Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 75.

carries two perils: first, it allocates the artworks a revelatory power that pre-defines certain assumptions on the relationship between artist, artwork and beholder. According to Grant Kester, in this understanding of art, the meaning of the artwork for the beholder is created through “an ‘orthopedic’ aesthetic (in which the viewer’s implicitly flawed modes of cognition or perception will be adjusted or improved via exposure to the work of art).”<sup>18</sup>

The second risk is that of re-articulating tropes of the colonial ‘Other’ which favor the senses and emotionality over imperialist rationality.<sup>19</sup> Both Vangad and Gill are professional artists. Nevertheless, the question remains if they are actually equal: Vangad remains bound to his Adivasi identity, while Gill positions herself as the medium between the audience and him. She grants the viewers an insight into his indigenous subjectivity and worldview, a gesture that reveals the asymmetrical power relations between the two artists. While Gill reveals little to nothing about her own identity, Vangad has to stand for modernity’s Other, for alternative sensibilities and epistemologies.

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18 Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 35.

19 This is a risk that comes along with James Clifford’s proposition of “Becoming Indigenous” and other reflections on post-anthropocentric theories that promote “long-standing Indigenous views of nature as a pluriverse of agents.” Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, 23; James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

A critical analysis of *Fields of Sight* allows to problematize the persisting powers of essentializing indigenous identity, whilst taking into account the violent and exploitative past and present, the current environmental crisis – and the emancipatory possibilities of collaborative, localized artistic practices. It thus sheds a critical light on contemporary forms of (aesthetic) knowledge production that depart from previous colonial, imperial and modernist epistemologies. However, as this paper argues, the positivist hopes that are invested into *Fields of Sight* might reveal more about the social and political context of the role of contemporary art and artists, than about actual possibilities of decolonization.

## SPEAKING FROM THE SURFACE

This section will critically contextualize the idea of art as a correctional tool of sight, of the perception of space and time and of subjectivity. In *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*, Chantal Mouffe does not distinguish between political and non-political art. To her, the ambiguity of art can contribute to proposing alternatives, shifting the boundaries of visibility and invisibility, thereby enabling new ways of seeing and envisioning subjectivities.<sup>20</sup> And indeed, Rashmi Viswanathan argues that *Fields of*

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20 Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,” 4–5.

*Sight* “allows the viewer to move into their not-as-yet-visible depths in an imaginative resistance of rational time and photographic space.”<sup>21</sup> From this perspective, the artwork is understood as a challenge to the “conventionality of rural landscape-documentary photographs, a genre with rich colonial roots and touristic resonance.”<sup>22</sup> On a material and sensorial level, Vangad’s inscriptions render the photographic surface visible as a site of meaning. According to Christopher Pinney, this surfacism enables post-colonial emancipation far from photography as a purely ‘Western’ or ‘colonial’ representative practice.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, *Fields of Sight* cannot simply be taken as a demonstration of indigenous or subaltern self-assertion. Throughout its creation and reception, it is still inserted into an aesthetic epistemology postulating certain assumptions on the representational power of art. Making visible the surface the materiality and the technique of photography, as Pinney notes, allows us to articulate a post-colonial art practice.<sup>24</sup> Instead of searching for representational depth in the depiction of the colonial ‘Other’

through, amongst other devices, the establishment of a singular view point, the “vernacular modernism” of the *surface* allows us to invest multiple layers of meaning into an image. Pinney resumes that, while colonial photography sought to fixate its people and objects through visual certainty, through rendering the photographic surface invisible, postcolonial practices emphasize the surface of the photograph. They thus reject the colonial illusion of depth and rationality and replace it with more mobile interpretations of the space and time of the image.<sup>25</sup>

In *Fields of Sight*, the surface ruptures with the photographic rationality of Gill’s landscape and portrait photographs. Through Vangad’s inscriptions, Gill’s singular view point is broken into several unstable perspectives from which the viewer can access the artwork. In some works of the series, Vangad directs the central point of view to a certain landmark, figure or object. For example, in *The Eye in the Sky*, his drawings concentrate on the Mahalaksmi peak, a religious site of the Warli community that bears special importance for the rituals of harvest festivities.<sup>26</sup> All other objects are radiating towards this central point: humans, birds and planes, mountains, trees, cars, skyscrapers and rice fields. Gill’s choice of framing

21 Viswanathan, “An Architecture of Memory.”

22 Viswanathan, “An Architecture of Memory.”

23 Christopher Pinney, “Introduction,” in *Photography’s Other Histories*, ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, Objects/Histories (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 1–16.

24 Christopher Pinney, “Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Postcolonialism, and Vernacular Modernism,” in *Photography’s Other Histories*, ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, Objects/Histories (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 202–3.

25 Pinney, “Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Postcolonialism, and Vernacular Modernism,” 202–3.

26 Yashodhara Dalmia, *The Painted World of the Warlis. Art and Ritual of the Warli Tribes of Maharashtra*, Loka Kala Series (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Academy, 1988), 49.

the photograph would not have demonstrated the centrality of the mountain in such a complex way. Vangad redirects the view through his inscription.

In most of the artworks of *Field of Sight*, as in other works that are classified as Warli painting, there is little ‘empty’ space between the drawings: Yashodhara Dalmia argues that in Warli paintings, “[t]he very tendency to eliminate [space] is only another method of representing [it]”.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, in *Fields of Sight*, the formerly empty space of the surface enables a different experience of space that draws attention to representational practices beyond the photograph. Furthermore, it ruptures with the relationship to time established by the colonial photograph. Instead of claiming a singular fixed point in time, there are multiple *chronotopics*, interrelations of space and time, at play in the series. In *Hiding in the Seth’s House During the Great Raid*, Vangad is shown with his back towards the camera’s lens in front of a house, seemingly looking inside. His hands are tucked into his jacket and he is decentered and small at the right edge of the frame. Grewal argues that Vangad’s presence which is “blocking [the viewer’s] ability to see him, replaces [the] perspective of power with another one, Vangad’s own.”<sup>28</sup> Additionally, his drawings of figures fighting or

fleeing, as well as the title of the work, re-visualize a temporal past that is not visible in the photograph itself: the violent confrontation between Warli people and local politicians, landlords, moneylenders, the police and forest department officials of the region in the 1970s.<sup>29</sup> According to Grewal, this concept of indigenous time is not caught in an eternal past, but articulating a different contemporary: “There were other worlds, Vangad and Gill tell us, other people, other lives and stories.. [sic] They are there, not gone, not past. [...] The photograph captures [Vangad] in the place that is his own, but the language of the photograph is not the only one that can speak for him.”<sup>30</sup> Viswanathan argues accordingly that Vangad’s construction of an “architecture of memory” is alternative and personal, “capitaliz[ing] on the distinct ontologies of Warli and landscape photographic traditions and their performances in the contemporary

27 Dalmia, *The Painted World of the Warlis. Art and Ritual of the Warli Tribes of Maharashtra*, 215.

28 Grewal, “Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad: Fields of Sight.”

29 Collins, Gill, and Vangad, “Another Way of Seeing”; Vangad himself was born in 1975 and it is therefore not evident if these are personal early childhood memories or rather stories of the collective memory of the Warli people who have struggled with violent oppression and exploitation since British colonial rule. The most violent of these confrontations were the Warli revolts of the 1940s, which were the organized political actions of the Warli people against their exploitation and alienation. According to Kamat, this had significant impact on their self-definition as a community: “[s]ince the late 1940s, tribals in Thane District have been organizing, not as ‘tribals’ but as landless peasants stressing class-based solidarity with other peasant groups in the region.” Sangeeta Kamat, “Anthropology and Global Capital. Rediscovering the Noble Savage,” *Cultural Dynamics* 13, no. 1 (January 3, 2001): 41.

30 Grewal, “Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad: Fields of Sight.”

imagination.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, Viswanathan proceeds, Gill’s and Vangad’s “collaboration sets up alternative relationships between photography and time, through a range of pictorial strategies that counter their expected (modern) relationship.”<sup>32</sup>

However, it is not enough to just consider the collaboration between the two artists. The meaning of an artwork is never solely defined by its creator, but by a network of diverse agents within and beyond the “art world”. Art, as Wyatt McGaffey reminds us, is a space in constant negotiation with authoritative, institutional definitions, a process that involves, amongst others, art critics, art historians, curators, auctioneers, collectors and exhibition goers.<sup>33</sup> In the discussions of *Fields of Sight* examined above, the collaborative aspects of the creation of meaning in the artwork are only acknowledged in a very limited way. In the case of *Fields of Sight*, the meaning of the artwork is not created through a dialogue between the artist and the viewer. Instead, the artwork’s disruptive meaning is pre-articulated by the artist and by the institutional epistemologies in which the artwork is presented. *Fields of Sight*, although created through a collaboration, is

repeatedly presented and analyzed as a finished artwork with one particular function and meaning: that of disrupting a certain visual hegemony. But paradoxically, throughout its production and circulation, it reinforces and stabilizes some of the asymmetric hegemonic concepts it attempts to overcome, or at least criticize. For instance, the anticipated meaning of the artwork consolidates certain self-assertions of the critical art viewers as self-congratulatory, “liberal-minded risktakers”.<sup>34</sup> Kester argues that these art viewers might identify themselves “with the subject positions of the artist rather than the hapless implied viewer.”<sup>35</sup> In this case, instead of disrupting, the artwork just aligns itself into an elitist logic of institutional art.<sup>36</sup> Kester’s reflections on collaborative art are certainly helpful in the context of Gill’s and Vangad’s practice. Nevertheless, they have to be extended: it is not only the relationship between the artists and the viewer that needs to be examined, but also between the two artists themselves. Therefore, the next paragraphs will delve further into the different roles and contexts in which the two artists position themselves – and in which they are positioned.

31 Viswanathan, “An Architecture of Memory.”

32 Viswanathan, “An Architecture of Memory.”

33 Wyatt MacGaffey, “‘Magic, or as We Usually Say, Art’: A Framework for Comparing European and African Art,” in *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa*, ed. Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 220; David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

34 Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 35–36.

35 Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 35–36.

36 After all, *Fields of Sight*’s circulates within the dominant canons and institutions of contemporary art: it has been exhibited internationally, as for example during the dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012. The institutional success of the series contradicts its supposedly ‘revolutionary’ character.

## BETRAYAL OR ARTICULATION? THE AMBIGUITIES OF COLLABORATIVE ART PRACTICES

The collaborative approach of *Fields of Sight* has to be understood as both asymmetrical and emancipating for Vangad. To articulate an indigenous worldview requires a close examination of the labels under which the series is handled. It is thus a highly ambivalent project and its analysis requires us to consider the social, political, economic and institutional contexts of the two artists in order to understand the forms of knowledge production at stake.

There is an undeniable asymmetry of access and visibility between the two artists: Gill – as an internationally recognized agent of contemporary art – enters Vangad’s everyday environment as an outsider from urban Mumbai, takes pictures of him and brings them back into her globally informed world, thus granting Vangad access to an audience that he might not have acquired otherwise.<sup>37</sup> Considering

that Gill is always the first artist to be named and referred to in the context of the series, she seems to claim a much more privileged position than Vangad. While in her statements, her intentions seem to be the opposite, this gives her significant power over the framing and representation of Vangad’s art and subjectivity. Kester cautions in any case of collaborative practice to “fear the power of the one, for whom the world in all its concrete particularity is a mere resource to be joyfully manipulated and transformed.”<sup>38</sup> For Kester, collaboration also always means betrayal. The betrayal in *Fields of Sight* might be the assumption that Vangad’s personal articulation and depiction of his environment are essentially Adivasi or indigenous.

However, Vangad’s artistic practice is inseparable from the local context of his community. Gill’s and Vangad’s collaboration is based on Gill’s long-term work with indigenous communities in rural Rajasthan and Maharashtra. Her work is often described as a poetic documentation of the lives of specific communities, for example *Notes from the Desert* (1999-ongoing) or *Acts of Appearance* (2015-ongoing).<sup>39</sup> While Gill is always providing a framework when working with the communities, she also leaves a certain interpretative agency to them. In *Acts of Appearance*, for

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37 Of course, this has to be relativized: with his solo art works, Vangad has previously gained international recognition through works of his shown at the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery, Australia, in 2016. Nevertheless, Vangad does not lose his label of “Indigenous Contemporary Artist.” Also, unlike other artists of this exhibition, he is not listed with an individual biography, but together with his colleague Balu Ladkya Dumada, although the two did not collaborate for this exhibition. “Warli Artists,” Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art, accessed August 18, 2018, <https://www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/apt8/artists/kalpa-vriksha/warli>.

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38 Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 2.

39 Natasha Ginwala, “A Multitudinous Cast,” *Nature Morte*, January 2018, <http://http://naturemorte.com/exhibitions/actsofappearance/>.

example, she portrays members of the Kokna Tribe, which is famous for crafting masks. She commissioned two famous craftsmen, the brothers Subhas and Bhagvan Dharma Kadu, as well as their families and a group of volunteers, to create masks that would represent the participants as contemporary individuals whose experiences and emotions are universally human.<sup>40</sup> Here, the full ambiguity of Gill's collaborative approach unfolds: in her own words, her artistic practice in *Acts of Appearance* is not about "telling a scripted story about any particular issue. If at all, the series only represents the idiosyncratic process of engaging with fellow artists, of trying to have a dialogue through our work, our personal mediums of photography and paper mache."<sup>41</sup> Still, as noted above, she is the one framing the work – both with her camera and with her access to an institutional art world that usually labels tribal artists differently. Through this approach, in the moment the artwork is presented as a finished object in the exhibition, the indigenous artists give away their interpretative agency. The great difference between *Acts of Appearance* and *Fields of Sight* is that in the former, a large number of

community members are involved in the creative process. In the latter, Vangad comes to stand (or is taken) as an individual representing the entire Warli community and worldview. Gill herself reproduces an essentializing vocabulary, including the oppositions of tribal and Contemporary art, and the sensitivities and perceptions that are associated with them. She uses metaphors of contrasting languages, rationalities and temporalities to emphasize their diverging cultural and social backgrounds, continuing preexisting tropes of the timeless, myth-oriented indigenous.<sup>42</sup>

In her words, the idea of opposite epistemologies is reinforced. And indeed, when Vangad himself speaks about *Fields of Sight*, he does not use the same vocabulary as Gill, a vocabulary that presents itself as familiar to the informed art viewer or theoretician. Vangad's comment on the series is the retelling of a story that was passed down to him by his father. In his comment, he refers to mythological figures and connects them with contemporary phenomena of environmental destruction.<sup>43</sup>

He thus uses the stories that circulate in his community to make sense of the world. Subject and object positions do not appear in dichotomic terms, but he sees himself as part of the stories that he depicts. Past and presence are not

40 "Nature Morte - Acts of Appearance," Nature Morte Gallery, December 7, 2018, <http://www.naturemorte.com>.

41 Manik Sharma, "Photo Exhibition: Gauri Gill Collaborates with Paper Mache Artists of the Kokna Tribe," *Hindustan Times*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/art-and-culture/photo-exhibition-gauri-gill-collaborates-with-paper-mache-artists-of-the-kokna-tribe/story-XeTqC3Btg4sl0vIZ2nCY5H.html>.

42 Collins, Gill, and Vangad, "Another Way of Seeing."

43 Collins, Gill, and Vangad, "Another Way of Seeing."

constructed in a linear way. But at the same time, his artistic articulations are not timeless.

As an artist of the Warli community, Vangad is involved in multiple scales of making sense of the world: asserting himself and being positioned at the same time.

In a way, one could understand this as strategic essentialization: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak proposes that subjects can make strategic use of their essentialization to put forward their own political or social agendas.<sup>44</sup>

T. J. Demos even argues that the recent valorization of indigenous “cosmopolitics – a creative social organization merged with world making –”<sup>45</sup> might even allow some optimism in “that it provides a new location of power for tribal/ indigenous peoples to assert their rights, to present a counter logic to development and modernization, to be agents of history rather than its objects.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Vangad is not simply the passive victim of hegemonic structures of the contemporary art world. Rather, he is also an active agent who uses his art as a means of social and economic emancipation within a wider network of so-called ‘Tribal’ artists. Tribal or indigenous art, especially

Warli painting since its commercial ‘discovery’ in the 1970s, has gained a considerable position as a specific category on the international and national art market.<sup>47</sup> Around that time, Warli communities were provided with paper and paint by the Handicraft and Handloom Board.<sup>48</sup> Thus, their artworks changed from ritual murals to mobile (and sellable) paintings that accommodated both ancient and contemporary motives from the everyday life and personal experiences of the artists.<sup>49</sup> Not only did the medium and motives change, but also the functions of the artwork. Formerly practiced by the women of the community and mainly as part of marriage rituals, their significance and function shifted from the creative performance to the finished product as a means of social and financial emancipation. This also led to a certain institutionalization of the Warli art practice. Vangad and some of his (exclusively male) colleagues, for example, are organized in a collective in order to promote their art and their activities, defining Warli painting on their website as “India’s global art, proudly tribal.”<sup>50</sup> The triple claim toward the global, the national and the tribal shows that the artists make use of their oeuvres as a means of positioning themselves

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44 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Criticism, Feminism and the Institution,” *Thesis Eleven* 10, no. 11 (1985): 157–87; Kamat, “Anthropology and Global Capital. Rediscovering the Noble Savage,” 35.

45 Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, 23.

46 Kamat, “Anthropology and Global Capital. Rediscovering the Noble Savage,” 35.

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47 Dalmia, *The Painted World of the Warlis. Art and Ritual of the Warli Tribes of Maharashtra*, 10.

48 Sudha Satyawadi, *Unique Art of Warli Paintings* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2010), 2.

49 Satyawadi, 2.

50 “Warli Painting. India’s Global Art, Proudly Tribal,” accessed June 20, 2018, <http://warli.adiyuva.in/>.

in the contemporary world: they affirm their indigenous identity to articulate their own particularity in relation to the hegemonic discourses of the national and the global. Here, the tribal becomes indeed a tool of strategic essentialization, as it is the artists themselves who speak of their worldview. Nevertheless, this agency does not free them from external expectations to perform a certain kind of indigeneity, as it is articulated in the discussions of *Field of Sight*. Taking Vangad as a representative of the Warlis, informing the outside world of “the particularity of place, the history and cosmology of his community” through his painting,<sup>51</sup> is a dangerous essentialism: the representation unifies a community that is as heterogenous and intrinsically contradictory as any other, and whose boundaries are blurred: Kamat describes the work of tribal organizations in the Thane district as having to “constantly negotiate the internal contradictions within the community, and struggle arduously to build consensus within the community over their relation to forests, to land, and to each other.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, the idea that Vangad could represent an indigenous way of seeing as such is misleading. Kamat summarizes the problematics of representing the Tribal communities of Thane: “Representation requires that complex social identities are presented as unitary, fairly simple,

51 Grewal, “Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad: Fields of Sight.”

52 Kamat, “Anthropology and Global Capital. Rediscovering the Noble Savage,” 42.

and located in bounded places. I problematize this desire to represent tribal culture as it involves an essentialization of tribal/indigenous groups, making invisible the complex cultural dynamics of their struggles for livelihood, security, and dignity.”<sup>53</sup> Hence, reading *Fields of Sight* as a “Another Way of Seeing”<sup>54</sup> risks to turn the series into a representative practice that simplifies complexity. Asymmetries remain constitutive of any kind of representation in which the dichotomy of an inside and an outside is involved. How (and how much), then, can the local communities speak through Gill’s artworks as in *Fields of Sight* or *Acts of Appearances*? The last paragraphs of this paper will investigate these issues of articulation, representation and locality.

### “EMPATHETIC INSIGHT” AND THE LOCAL

Kester introduces the idea of “empathetic insight” in the context of dialogical aesthetics.<sup>55</sup> Through an open relationship between the collaborators and the audience, “[d]ialogical works can challenge dominant representations of a given community, and create a more

53 Kamat, “Anthropology and Global Capital. Rediscovering the Noble Savage,” 45.

54 Collins, Gill, and Vangad, “Another Way of Seeing.”

55 Grant H. Kester, “Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, Second edition (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 158.

complex understanding of, and empathy for, that community among a broader public”, and thus conjure emphatical insight.<sup>56</sup> But according to Kester, this open relationship demands a highly inclusive and unstable approach to the production of meaning of an artwork. He criticizes the practice of collaborative projects in which the artist alone articulates the significance of the artwork: “a dialogical aesthetic does not claim to provide, or require, this kind of universal or objective foundation. Rather, it is based on the generation of a local consensual knowledge that is only provisionally binding and that is grounded precisely at the level of collective interaction.”<sup>57</sup> In the case of Gill’s projects, the “generation of local consensual knowledge” follows her framing, and her approach therefore carries many of the flaws that Kester criticizes.

It is important to note that Gill did not plan out the collaboration with Vangad from the beginning. She came to spend time with Vangad while she was working on another project in his village. She took the photographs while Vangad was showing her around and telling her his stories and memories. They built a personal connection before Gill, back in her studio, looked at the developed photographs and felt that Vangad’s narrations were “missing”

in the pictures that she had taken.<sup>58</sup> Only then she sent the photographs back to him, so he could transform them according to his own ideas. Gill envisions her projects as “elastic and open-ended”,<sup>59</sup> as an attempt to “mark making.”<sup>60</sup> The communities she works with might be the only ones who can justifiably determine if she succeeds to do so or not. So how to think about her artworks from an academic, art historical perspective that is interested in narratives and knowledge production?

Artworks like *Acts of Appearance* and *Fields of Sight* reify the ways in which we make sense of the world. They negotiate and navigate between an abundance of themes that are often articulated as separate entities: the tensions between the local and the global, between different spatial and temporal scales, the ongoing crisis of social and economic exploitation and marginalization of subaltern groups, environmental destruction, the negotiations of authoritative knowledge and self-determination, and the search for alternatives and solutions to all of this. To make (a different) sense of this seeming chaos, many scholars propose a return to the local to then analyze the vernacular’s relation to the global. *Demos*, for instance, demands to create “relational geographies” as the

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56 Kester, “Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art,” 159.

57 Kester, “Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art,” 157.

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58 Collins, Gill, and Vangad, “Another Way of Seeing.”

59 Viswanathan, “An Architecture of Memory.”

60 Reema Gehi, “Retellings,” *Mumbai Mirror*, April 20, 2016, <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/others/sunday-read/Retellings/articleshow/51858210.cms>.

“aesthetic dimension of experimental and perceptual engagement with the commitment to postcolonial ethico-political praxis, and do so with sustained attention to how local activities interact with global formations.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Kester calls for collaborative projects that possess “the dual consciousness of both the local and the global implications and interconnections of a given site and situation.”<sup>62</sup> Again, Kester demands that the “the orientation and trajectory of critical insight aren’t predetermined, but rather, depend on the collaborator’s response to the contradictions, possibilities, and points of resistance thrown up by the problem-at-hand”.<sup>63</sup> Thus, *Fields of Sight* becomes problematic in the moment it is taken as a ‘universal’ solution for ‘universal’ problems. While the series was indeed created in a rather processual than predetermined manner, the meaning it was given *a posteriori* is still informed by powerful dichotomies of art theory. As a discipline, like Kamat notes in the case of anthropology, it plays “a critical role [...] in interpellating the local with global projects, the particular with the universal. In so doing, it constitutes the local, harmonizing it with transnational discourses that are signified with other meanings and desires.”<sup>64</sup> It is therefore not

enough to celebrate projects that articulate themselves around a particular locality, as Kester does. Additionally, one has to consider *how* and *by whom* this locale is defined. Instead of creating new forms of representation, artistic practice could set out to enable ways of articulation, “theorize[ing] subjects as constituted by, and constitutive of, global forces and discourses. [A]rticulation compels us to engage with structural and discursive relations that produce social identities, rather than assume them as a priori.”<sup>65</sup> To investigate whether the conceptual framework of the artistic realm allows such forms of articulations or whether art and representation are inseparably entangled with each other, are questions that must be asked along the way.

## CONCLUSION

As elaborated at the very beginning of this paper, Demos sees political art at the nexus of politics, knowledge production and creative experimentation. Similarly, Mouffe argues that critical art “makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.”<sup>66</sup>

61 Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, 12.

62 Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 225.

63 Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 225.

64 Kamat, “Anthropology and Global Capital.

Rediscovering the Noble Savage,” 30.

65 Kamat, “Anthropology and Global Capital. Rediscovering the Noble Savage,” 45.

66 Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic

These definitions of art, with all their attractive promises, are informed by certain assumptions about the revelatory, educational power of art. In *Fields of Sight*, these assumptions articulate themselves around the idea of indigenous counter-visualities that are attributed with the hope of envisioning a counter-modernity to solve ecological and representational crises. Searching for self-determined forms of asserting one's presence in the world and finding solutions to the existing violence and injustices of the present is relevant and important. Keeping this perceived sense of urgency in mind, this paper has sought to critically contextualize the replacement of one essentialism with another. The paradox of expected instability dominates the conceptualization and reception of *Fields of Sight*. It is this ambiguity that positions Vangad as a representative of a particular indigenous experience and sensitivity and fixes him in this position. According to Kester, the "intellectual challenge does not lie in yet another reiteration of this familiar claim [of 'undecidability' or 'ambiguity'], but in working through the various ways in which this ambiguity is produced situationally, what effects it has at a given site of practice."<sup>67</sup> The ambiguity of *Fields of Sight* certainly is an important component of its concept and interpretation. But at the same time, it seeks to stabilize

certain notions of indigeneity, art and cosmopolitics – claims that have to be critically assessed.

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Spaces," 5.

<sup>67</sup> Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 60–61.