

## **Counter-Epistemologies of the Global South: Indian Floor Drawings Re-envisioned**

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This discussion considers the female, pan-Indian tradition of drawing threshold designs, which constitutes a visual phenomenon that is situated at the intersection of multiple spheres of marginalization, taking its Tamil variant as focus. As a gendered practice representative of the global South that differs from Euro-centric visual conceptions it was neglected by European art historians, but also failed to register with Indian nationalist conceptions of art in the early twentieth century as well as the Subaltern Studies Group's 'history from below'. It is not considered fine art, nor does it feature in design history, and has, at best, figured in anthropology or folklore studies, yet has not garnered much attention in these fields. My proposition is that this curious 'neglect' is indicative of larger issues, and that none of the methodological frameworks associated with the above disciplines are able to cater for the aesthetic registers of the practice (this point is developed more fully in my article 'Happy Homes and the Indian Nation'). I furthermore argue that the practice's 'strangeness' constitutes a gift for radical aesthetic enquiry, and that it offers the potentiality of articulating a counter-epistemology of the South that differences prevalent approaches to the post-colonial and the global in the visual field. In other words its very neglect offers a unique opportunity to re-examine these frameworks in the light of what the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has called the 'abyssal line', a metaphorical boundary which divides social reality into zones of visibility and invisibility.

For Santos this ontological divide reflects the historical lines of demarcation that separated the Old from the New Worlds, such as the ones drawn by the Treaty of Tordesillas between Spain and Portugal in 1494, which divided the newly discovered lands outside Europe between the Portuguese Empire and the Crown of Castille. The so-called 'amity lines' which were verbally agreed between French and Spanish negotiators of the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559 are another pertinent

example. What matters for this discussion is that on the European side of these lines 'lawful relations' between the two powers were to be observed, while beyond them whoever was the stronger 'was the master' (Mattingly 149). As de Sousa Santos points out, these lines constitute far more than cartographic markers. They rather signal a shift in the European conception of the world that displaced the previous, predominantly Christian world view, fostering what he describes as the fundamentally exclusionary epistemology of the modern world (2) that separates the supposedly civilized 'old world' of Europe from the uncivilized 'new' world of South America. In consequence, as (so-called) civil society emerged in Europe with individuals entering the world of social contracts, the 'state of nature' was left behind, or rather, relegated to the 'beyond', that is the 'other' side of these lines defined as the backward, colonial sphere of the New World (3). The newly created, separate realm of the colonial thus became a place where different rules and norms applied than in Europe; a move that converted the simultaneity of existence of these worlds into non-contemporaneity (3) and created what he refers to as the abyssal cartography of the modern (4).

As de Sousa Santos explains, modern society is still characterized by this divide as the literal cartographic lines of the past have become 'metaphorical global lines' that structure cultural and social interrelations (3). Present-day globalization, therefore, is far less 'global' than is generally acknowledged: it excludes the cultural worlds in the sphere of the 'non-existent', that is the radical zone of exclusion where the reality of everything placed within it 'disappears', is declared irrelevant or incomprehensible (1 and 5). According to de Sousa Santos, popular, plebeian, peasant and indigenous knowledges are located in this 'zone of invisibility' and are contrasted with science, philosophy and theology, which, classed as acceptable knowledge, are situated on 'this' side of the line (2).

Approached from this point of view, the question of women's street art thus entails a larger ontological dimension which involves the bridging of the abyssal divide between the realms of art and design defined along Western lines and

traditional indigenous knowledge and cultural practice. A post-abysal re-framing of the tradition, as will be broached in the following, hence represents an exercise in articulating a counter-epistemology. The discussion will begin with an introduction to the practice focused on its Tamil variant called *kolam*. This will be followed by a précis of current approaches to the global in visual and historical studies, an exploration of Ashis Nandy's reflections on Indian traditions as alternative cultural resource for the present as well as the negotiation of the practice through the lens of Deleuze-Guattarean philosophy and aesthetics.

The drawing of designs on the thresholds of public and private buildings is thought to date back to the Harappan age. It is a pan-Indian tradition that is executed twice daily by women in front of the doorsteps of their homes but is also drawn in front of public buildings, offices, shops and shrines. The women consider the practice housework rather than art. The whole community participates in this domestic, female routine as it witnesses the designs and erases them as part of the ebb and flow of everyday activities (see Image 1). Tamil designs traditionally are abstract compositions created by looping continuous lines around a structure of grids that determine the design (see Image 2), while other regions adopted more representational designs.

The practice also has ritual dimensions which led to associations of superstition and primitivity, reflecting charges that were leveled against Indian culture during the colonial period which became foundational for post-independence India (Nandy 85), resulting in a distancing from such practices (see Dohmen 2001). The neglect of the tradition of drawing threshold designs therefore reflects the difficulty of reconciling Western notions of art and originality with practices rooted in a world view that differs from the modern, scientific perspective characteristic of 'this' side of the abyssal divide. In Tamil Nadu the designs, for example, are deeply rooted in traditional conceptions of the world of matter, which, as developed by the anthropologist E. Valentine Daniel, is considered to be in continuous flux and needs to be kept in balance. *Kolams* thus participate in the daily harmonizing activities

required to maintain a happy personal and community life. The street drawings, moreover, are the everyday public version of similar designs used in private female ritual practices called *nonpu* where this aspect is more prevalent. In this context they establish a space of purity for the invoked deity to descend into (see Baker Reynolds).

Yet even though the everyday version of the designs are executed and displayed in public spaces, and make a regular, ever-changing appearance on the streets and urban thoroughfares of Tamil villages, towns and cities, they are conceptually invisible in the spheres of culture on 'this' side of the line, that is the global spheres of art, design and visual culture that have, for the most part, ignored the practice. Nonetheless, the global turn in contemporary art and the perceived greater inclusivity of artists from non-Western origins it instigated, has been lauded as the end of post-colonial divisions in the arts. However, as the cultural critic Chin-Tao Wu points out, on closer inspection, all is not as it seems. She has, for example, shown that the 'marginal' artists adopted by the international art circuit had relocated to a Western metropolis prior to their 'inclusion' and holds that the concentric and hierarchical structure of the art world remains fully intact, arguing that all that has changed is that "Western' has been replaced by the new buzzword of the 'global'" (115). Taking these points further I propose that the condition of the global can but be characterized by such exclusions and reflect the abyssal condition of the modern unless this fundamental schism is addressed, which I argue as the next step discussions of the global are yet to take.

Recent discussions such as Elkins' *Is Art History Global?* and Belting's *The Global Contemporary. Artworld after 1989* illustrate this point. These titles are mostly geared towards the world of contemporary art and approach the global from the perspective of abyssality. Elkins' text, for example, suggests Western perspectives for Western art, while advocating native methodological approaches to non-Western visual objects, proposing them to be culled, for example, from ancient scriptures, without applying the same stringency in terms of its provenance and

context that such sources would be subject to in a Western context. Such a proposition is thus marked by a lingering essentialism, and chimes with other prevalent approaches that remain marked by Euro-centricity, resting on additive procedures and notions of authenticity that hark back to the nineteenth-century history of the discipline. Parul Dave Mukherjee rightly challenges this premise and asserts the need for a 'meta-theory' which 'provincializes' Western art history and acknowledges shifts in theories of art and culture as they cross cultural boundaries, while stressing the urgency of developing new conceptual tools in order to do so (Mukherji 101). Monica Juneja's *Global Art History and the 'Burden of Representation'* which suggests a transcultural approach to global art history offers a conceptually nuanced approach for exploring such cross-cultural appropriations and thus offers an important stepping stone to such a 'meta-theory' which I propose needs to address the fundamental cartography of abyssality that underpins prevalent conceptions of the global.

In design history debates around the post-colonial are only just developing as the discipline belatedly catches up with the rest of the humanities and its discussion of the global. Victor Margolin, a pioneer of the subject who already reflected on 'world design' in 1996, recently authored a two volume survey on the subject in 2017 which, while taking a 'world history' perspective, also seeks to address larger cultural, social and economic issues, thus making an important if not unproblematic contribution to the field (see Margolin 1996, 2011, 2012, 2017). Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello, and Sarah Teasley who jointly edited the volume *Global Design History* acknowledge that the subject is still in its infancy (10; see also Huppatz 182). Yet their introduction to the field presents a curiously meagre reflection on the methodological issues that are at stake. It simply proposes 'connections and comparisons' as conceptual framework and thus misses an important opportunity to situate the subject in relation to debates in art history and other relevant subjects in the humanities. The authors, however, rightly distance themselves from 'modernist design history's triumphalist narrative of progress' and expectations of delivering a master narrative. Following Margolin's lead they also loosen the

association of the subject with industrial processes, which, potentially at least, allows practices such as the drawing of threshold designs to come into view (2). Daniel J. Huppertz, in contrast, offers a more considered framing of the field and of its methodological concerns, situating the subject, for example, in the context of post-colonial critiques of Euro-centric narratives and critical debates of approaches to the writing of 'global' histories while challenging the 'grand narrative approach' which he argues remains pervasive in design history. Thus while global design studies does lag behind the discussions in other fields, it has begun to include further geographical regions in the writing of such histories. The remit of the subject, however, continues to be concerned with practices representative of the sphere of visibility as proposed by de Sousa Santos and its deeper epistemological issues are hardly broached at present.

The discipline of history, likewise, has grappled with present-day 'global-mania'. There is 'world history', for example, which similar to 'world design' is critiqued for its universalist assumptions that put it uncomfortably close to the nineteenth century teleologies integral to imperialism. The latter, however, has abandoned the modernization paradigm and the notion of a linear progression from the traditional to the modern, and acknowledges the heterogeneity of globalizing processes (Huppertz 187-88). Another approach is 'global history' which adopts more differentiated and critical approaches, yet has also been critiqued for universalist tendencies. New imperial history also needs to be mentioned here. Its extensive methodological breadth includes transnational and transcultural approaches to the study of cultural phenomena, and encompasses questions of gender, identity and race pivotal to post-colonial studies that have opened up new vistas and recovered hidden histories (see Howe for example). Yet despite such deeply challenging perspectives, these approaches at best blur the divisions that structure the world's epistemological cartography without addressing its condition of abyssality head-on.

The work of Ashis Nandy and Deleuze and Guattari is of interest here as it adopts a different tack that resonates with de Sousa Santos' demand for a post-abyssal

epistemology and Mukherji's call for a differenced meta-theory. Nandy, for example, draws attention to the bureaucratized, dispassionate, calculated violence inherent in the ideologies of progress and modernity and to the detrimental consequences of the absolutisation of difference they entail. He argues that this has led to critical theory's 'one-way style of demystification' which legitimises the 'forced obsolescence for those marginalised by the world system' (208). Pointing out that the present-day monolithic, ethno-chauvinist understanding of 'tradition' represents a continuation of the colonial civilising mission, he draws attention to India's traditionally fluid conception of selfhood (66) and the religious, cultural and cosmopolitan pluralisms it enabled (123-8), advocating the reclaiming of India's tradition of heterodoxy as a cultural basis for Indian democracy (30). Nandy's emphasis on a pre-modern, culturally plural 'multiplicity of self' as basis for a different social bedrock for Indian democracy (126-27) is reminiscent of the connective notions of subjectivity Deleuze and Guattari develop in their work that lies at the heart of their differenced aesthetics. The pluralism of selfhood they propose is similar to the one Nandy suggests as pre-modern ways of conceptualising the self in non purist terms in India, in that it radically differs from the Enlightenment model of the individuated self. It also encompasses the non-human and cosmological realms that have been relegated to the sphere of invisibility by secularism in the European mould, creating the present global culture which Nandy characterises as an 'imperium of denial' (3).

In the following the radical aesthetics of Deleuze-Guattari will be explored in view of its potential for offering a post-abyssal perspective on women's street art in India. This approach is premised on perceived convergences between Deleuze-Guattarean aesthetics, which frames art in terms of harnessing the forces of matter, and the traditional Tamil world view entailed in the drawing of threshold designs, which conceives of matter as malleable and in flux, necessitating continuous balancing efforts. The drawing of the designs thus constitute acts of re-establishing of order by harmonizing cosmic forces and holding the forces of chaos at bay, which, given the changeable nature of the cosmos, needs to be repeated time and again.

Considered in the context of Deleuze-Guattarean philosophy, the Tamil practice is, furthermore, reminiscent of the authors' notion of 'bending the line', which they posit as an art of living that establishes an 'endurable zone' in which humans can install themselves and which needs to be perpetually redone (Negotiations 111). For them 'folding the line' implies a 'living on the edge', and for Deleuze this line is destructive. He describes it as 'deadly, too violent and fast, carrying us into breathless regions' (Negotiations 111); a framing that, according to the anthropologist Baker Reynolds, resonates with Tamil women who encounter the forces of chaos in their ritual activity. As she suggests it is woman who 'steps into the chaotic, dark world of death and learns its secrets', and who considers 'the eating of death' woman's work (310).

More pertinent still, Deleuze-Guattarean aesthetics is grounded in the sphere of the non-human, which I argue is key for their philosophy's potential to offer a post-abysal approach to women's designs in Tamil Nadu. They present that art does not originate with human beings, but rather appears among human beings 'under artificial and belated conditions' (Thousand Plateaus 320). Drawing attention to the daily ritual of the brown stagemaker (*Scenopoeetes dentirostris*), a bird that 'lays down landmarks each morning by dropping leaves it picks from its tree, and then turning them upside down so the paler underside stands out against the dirt', the authors argue this act as a 'matter of expression' (Thousand Plateaus 315), subsequently redefining expressiveness in terms of taking possession and environmentality rather than human artistic activity (Thousand Plateaus 317). For them expression is, therefore, no longer epitomised by an inner, subjective, experiential core, nor an inside-out trajectory or a consciousness model associated with artistic genius and individual creativity, a notion which excluded the work of Indian house wives from discussions of aesthetic practice. It is rather defined as relational to an outside, an environs. This proposed connectivity is suggestive for the practice of drawing thresholds designs which expresses a lived and actively negotiated correlation between a fluid conception of matter, local spatialities and cosmological events as expressed in the requirement that the transition from the old

to the new year requires more elaborate designs than the ones drawn on ordinary days.

Deleuze and Guattari, moreover, use the metaphor of the house for the creation of art, which resonates with the contexts of women's street designs in Tamil Nadu. For them, art begins with the creation of a territory, an act that 'constructs a house' (What is Philosophy 179). They suggest, that it is through the 'territory-house system' that pure sensory qualities of art emerge, and elaborate that 'all that is needed to produce art is here: a house, some postures, colors, and songs' (What is Philosophy 183-85). Furthermore, they argue that the 'house takes part in an entire becoming', that is the 'non-organic life of things', and that the house not only isolates but 'opens onto cosmic forces' (What is Philosophy 180, 185). And they repeat that 'if nature is like art, this is always because it combines these two living elements in every way: House and Universe, *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich*, territory and deterritorialization' (What is Philosophy 186). This statement again resonates with the practice of threshold drawings, as erasure is integral to the designs: *kolams* are not drawn to be admired, to become part of an aesthetic canon, or point to the genius of their creators. They rather are drawn, erased and drawn again, and are seen to performatively harmonize material substance, cosmic forces and the local community, that is they are primarily affective rather than perceptual.

There are further convergences still. Deleuze and Guattari, for example, argue that the 'home does not pre-exist', and that it is necessary 'to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space' [for living] (Thousand Plateaus 311). They also suggest, that 'sonorous or vocal components are very important' and refer to 'a wall of sound, or at least a wall with some sonic bricks' such as when a 'housewife sings to herself [...] as she marshals the antichaos forces of her work' (Thousand Plateaus 311). These propositions conjure up Baker Reynold's discussion of Tamil women's private rituals which entail the drawing of *kolams* and chanted invocations of the divine. She states that 'in drawing a kolam woman becomes fashioner of the cosmos, for she calls into being the spatial and

temporal dimensions of the world' (250), pointing out that *kolams* are inwardly and outwardly protective as the 'outer lines form also a barrier which serves both to protect movement inward toward the centre made by untoward forces and outwards on the part of the deity' (251). Moreover, Tamil women who perform rites and draw *kolams* as part of their private observances, abandon their subjectivity and participate in a larger world of divine power. As Baker Reynolds elaborates the 'drawing of kolams proceeds from a dissolution and assimilation of all forms back into the formless' (252).

The suggestion therefore is, that Deleuze-Guattarean philosophy offers a congenial epistemological framework and contemporary conceptual language that allows for a post-abysal reframing of the practice of drawing threshold designs that liberates it from the multiple marginalization it has been subject to. Approached from this perspective, the practice can thus claim its place on 'this' side of the abyssal line, in the world of art 'proper', while remaining connected to Tamil notions of matter and cosmology. It is taking its place as a contemporary visual practice of value in a conceptually re-configured world of art no longer defined by abyssality: the daily actions of Tamil housewives, their cultural context of ritual performativity and the balancing of substances and forces can now register in a non-exoticising and non-pejorative manner (see also Dohmen 2016). This re-framing of the practice based on Deleuze-Guattarean aesthetics, however, not only brings the design practice and its cultural contexts into a conversation with the global contemporary, it also challenges the latter's abyssal presuppositions: despite the art world's ethnographic and relational turn, despite post-modernism's and post-colonialism's momentous emphasis on alterity, despite the 'global turn' in the humanities, and despite the engaged interest in Deleuze-Guattari's work, the global has continued to be defined by abyssality and has, like the reception of Deleuze-Guattarean aesthetics, remained largely concerned with 'this' cultural terrain. The suggested application of Deleuze-Guattarean aesthetics to women's street art in Tamil Nadu thus expands the range of aesthetic examples discussed on the basis of Deleuze-

Guattarean approaches, and provides a new impetus for a differenced de-colonising of the global frameworks of visual culture.

The proposed insertion of Tamil threshold designs, and, more generally, of indigenous, popular and vernacular knowledges, into the global conversation in a non-pejorative, non-exploitative and connective manner, therefore is not concerned with situating such traditions in the hallowed halls of fine art. It rather aims to subvert and challenge what de Sousa Santos has called the present-day condition of the abyssal cartography of the modern (4). Post-abyssal re-configurations of this world order, therefore, demand different avenues to de-colonising the mind and culture. The forging of what de Sousa Santos refers to as a post-abyssal 'epistemology of the South' rather is rooted in what he refers to as 'inter-knowledge' (2, 3-4, 6 and 10). The potentiality of the re-framing proposed in this discussion, therefore, extends beyond the issue of women's floor designs and addresses a fundamental exclusion at the heart of the modern Nandy is also concerned with. It thus is relevant not only to present-day approaches of art and culture in India, but implies a fundamental critique of the current understanding of the global which denies co-evalness to visual cultures rooted in 'other-than-modern' world views.

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### **Table(s)/Figure(s), Film images**

All the images were taken by the author



(The image needs to be cropped – the black lines need to be cut off)

#### **Figure 1**

Threshold designs are drawn in front of house entrances and are erased as people go about their daily business. The image shows a Tamil woman is resting in the front steps of her home with her feet on a *kolam*. Photo credit: Renate Dohmen



(The image needs to be cropped – the black lines need to be cut off)

Figure 2

Kolams for special occasions are larger than the ordinary everyday threshold designs. This image shows a large traditional loop design normally executed for festive occasions, but drawn for a *kolam* competition on this occasion. Photo credit: Renate Dohmen