WISER Research Seminar

**On the Valuation of Art:**

**Re-negotiating universal and particular repertoires of forms.**

The contemporary moment offers several dynamics to problematize the making of the value of art. On the one hand, the convergence of a globally networked world favors framings of artistic repertoires and forms that generate universally recognizable art grammars. On the other hand, this same mechanism engenders a new quest for distinction in its emphasis on the local - or unique - as a source of worth. Both movements play out in the resurgent quest for decolonization that challenges norms and standards, thereby re-negotiating the interplay between universal and particular repertoires of forms.

Attributing value to an object implies that this ‘thing’ carries meaning and quality for a broader public, as opposed to it having worth for an individual alone. Worth-making denotes the collective framing and infrastructuring – the structural, narrative, normative and enactment work – that is required to generate the worth of something. Concerning art, this means that its value results from this collective framing action and a resulting art grammar that is legible to broader publics. Yet, at the same time, this value must index the distinct aesthetic quality of the artwork as its singular source that can translate into a monetarized market value. At the core of this translation process are the dialectics between matter (as affordance) and non-matter (as worth). As part of this translation process, notions of origins or roots are strategically deployed in artistic work and their valuation.

Starting from these tensions, this research seminar will inquire into current negotiations over the value of art in the making through debates about contemporary art that is already global and universally accessible. Key to this endeavor is the concept of “art from overseas”, an avowedly outdated category dating from the period of European colonialism from the 16th to 20th centuries referring to that which was not European. A different conceptual and political connotation will be given to the term: Europe, too, is “overseas” as seen from America, Africa and Australia, and in some sense, also from Asia. Art from Europe in Latin America or in Africa is ‘art from overseas’ and vice versa. With this vocabulary, we intentionally want to undermine the binaries implicated in Western *vs.* Non-Western art and in the Global North *vs.* Global South.

**SCHEDULE**

The Seminar will meet at WISER Seminar Room, 6th Floor Richard Ward Building

*From 3:00pm to 5:00 pm on: 11 March, 1 April, 17 April 2020.*

Readings will be pre-circulated.

Convened by **Richard Rottenburg** and **Achille Mbembe**, this research seminar is open to the public. Those who wish to attend MUST register with [Najibha.Deshmukh@wits.ac.za](mailto:Najibha.Deshmukh@wits.ac.za)

**Readings** (provisional):

Becker, Howard Saul. 1982. *Art worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Boltanski, Luc, and Laurent Thévenot. 2006. *On justification: economies of worth*. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Calkins, Sandra, and Richard Rottenburg. 2016. "Technology, Infrastructure and the Making of Value in Gold Prospection." In *Networks of Knowledge Production in Sudan: Identities, Mobilities, and Technologies*, edited by Sondra Hale and Gada Kadoda, 265-283. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

DiMaggio, Paul J. 1982. "Cultural entrepreneurship in nineteenth-century Boston: the creation of an organizational base for high culture in America." *Media, Culture and Society* 4:33-50.

DiMaggio, Paul J. 1991. "Constructing an organizational field as a professional project: U.S. Art Museums, 1920-1940." In *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, edited by Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, 267-292. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Mbembe, Achille. 2019. *Of African Objects in Western Museums*, *Gerda Henkel Vorlesung*. Muenster: Rhema.

Senghor, Léopold Sédar. 1956. “African-Negro Aesthetics” (translated by Elaine P. Halperin). *Diogenes* 4 (16): 23-38.

Senghor, Leopold Sédar. 1956. "The Spirit of Civilisation or the Laws of African Negro Culture." *Presence Africaine* 8-10:51-64.

Thévenot, Laurent. 1984. "Rules and implements: investment in forms." *Social Science Information* 23 (1):1-45.

Zarobell, John. 2017. *Art and the Global Economy*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.