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Kaisu Koski, *Injection Simulator* (2015)

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VACZINENATIONS! AS PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH

RACHELLE VIADER KNOWLES

VacZineNations! is a collaborative artwork led by Rachelle Viader Knowles and Mkrtich Tonoyan, produced by artists, students, and designers in the UK, Canada, China, and Armenia, and exhibited as part of <Immune Nations> at Galleri KiT in Trondheim, Norway, and UNAIDS in Geneva, Switzerland in 2017. This paper positions the artwork within the context of practice-led research and dialogic approaches to art-making, identifying a set of nine key characteristics for translocal, dialogue-based art.

VacZineNations! est une œuvre d'art collaborative dirigée par Rachelle Viader Knowles et Mkrtich Tonoyan, produite par des artistes, des étudiants et des designers au Royaume-Uni, au Canada, en Chine et en Arménie, et exposée dans le cadre de <Immune Nations> au Galleri KiT à Trondheim, en Norvège, et ONUSIDA à Genève, Suisse en 2017. Cet article place l'œuvre d'art dans le contexte de la recherche axée sur la pratique et des approches dialogiques de la création artistique, identifiant un ensemble de neuf caractéristiques clés pour l'art translocal, basé sur le dialogue.

*V*ac*ZineNations!* is a collaborative and participatory art project, developed with artists, students, and designers from the UK, Armenia, Canada, and China. It was devised as a contribution to *<Immune Nations>* with my long-time collaborator, Armenian artist Mkrtich Tonoyan. The project outcomes included three artworks, *Big Zine*, a series of *small zines*, and *Window Graphics*, and two academic papers. In this essay, I'd like to excavate the methodological approach in the project. I want to do this in part because, like others on the project,[1] my participation in *<Immune Nations>* coincided with my doctoral work, which was undertaken in part via prac-

tice while also maintaining my position as Associate Head (International) of the School of Art and Design, Coventry University, UK. *VacZineNations!* presented an opportunity to apply some of the insights of my thesis and further test the adaptability of the translocal and dialogue-based methodological framework and methods that the doctoral research set out to articulate.

The first section of this paper is adapted from the "Methodological Approach" chapter of my thesis. The second section is adapted from the "Translocality" chapter, addressing the ideas, methods, and position of translocality in art. The final section reworks the findings of my thesis to reflect on how the characteristics of translocal dialogue-based art were present in the process and outcomes of *VacZineNations!*

THE ARTIST/ACADEMIC

In 2014, during a summer school that I attended around the midway point of the PhD, I was asked a seemingly simple question: What is your practice? As a practice-led researcher developing their methodological framework, this pivotal question prompted a reconsideration of what I do: the activities I undertake, the methods I employ, the outputs I produce, the position I take, the identity I claim, and the zones of culture/knowledge/society to which I contribute. Katie MacLeod's study of artistic researchers was valuable in the process of formulating a response to the question and, by doing so, reformulating my understanding of my methodological approach. MacLeod identifies three loose, overlapping, and interwoven categories for the artistic researcher. She defines Type A as a researcher undertaking research to reinvigorate or shift their practice through an approach that may offer new knowledge to their field; Type B as an "artist/teacher/researcher" working in academia and seeking to apply a deeper theorization and methodological engagement to their practice; and Type C as a researcher engaged with a "revealing" of their practice through a back and forth stabilizing/destabilizing process of art-making and writing (MacLeod 1–2). Each of MacLeod's three types felt relevant to my approach. However, as an artist/teacher/researcher employed full-time by higher education institutions over the

last 15 years, I most strongly identify with Type B, and the definition captures the inter-informative experience and methodological focus of the artist/teacher/researcher. However, I expand the list of roles to include academic *leadership*, reflecting on the importance this role continues to play in my practice and professional life. MacLeod's work helped me articulate the methodology of my research practice, a variant of MacLeod's Type B appropriate to my experience: artist + (teacher/researcher/leader) = artist/academic. In describing the methodology of my research approach as "practice-led," therefore, my practice is not the practice of an artist as I would once have envisioned it, but rather the practice of the contemporary university-based artist/academic: the professional undertakings of an artist integrated with the interlinked activities of teaching, research, and academic leadership, where each may be approached through creative and practice-led means.

In *VacZineNations!* each layering of the artist/academic methodology is apparent. Tonoyan and I engaged with the project as practitioners, drawing on our respective backgrounds in socially engaged creative practices, and also as educators, working with students and artist/teacher colleagues through our networks of institutional connections. My academic leadership role and responsibilities towards internationalization at Coventry University led to the key decision to embed *VacZineNations!* into the curriculum for our students in BA and MA Graphic Design, through an online international learning and exchange project with Central South University in China and the inclusion of visual arts students from Western University and the University of Alberta in Canada.

THE TRANSLOCAL ARTIST

V*acZineNations!* and the broader *<Immune Nations>* project were international in their breadth and reach. Artists and designers located in four countries (and a greater number of nationalities) came together to work on the three component projects of *VacZineNations!*; the outcomes were produced in China, the UK, Armenia, and Canada, and exhibited in the UK, Norway, and Switzer-

land. Our working practice engaged both face-to-face and mediated forms of communications (such as email and Skype) to devise and produce the works together and at a distance. The use of such blended modes of communication and approach may seem an obvious solution to the practicalities of a geographically dispersed project, but as my doctoral research revealed, in participatory art, the face-to-face mandate of socially engaged practices in contemporary art and practices in media art that engage communications technologies are often segregated.

Rudolf Frieling, curator of media arts at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, provides evidence of the problem in what he calls a "gap" between socially engaged practices in contemporary art, and practices that actively engage with the interconnected conditions of networked society and the impacts of globalization (32). I position my research within this supposed gap with the aim to reveal the characteristics of this distinct zone of art practice, and to articulate the reasons why artists might work this way. The research investigates how dialogue-based social practices in art, extended and augmented by mediated communications, enable an expanded social practice in dialogue with geographer Tim Cresswell's ideas of the (geo) "politics of mobility" (*On the Move*; "Towards a Politics of Mobility"), the forces that affect and control the conditions of human movement.

As previously mentioned, my primary collaborator through both the PhD research and *VacZineNations!* was Armenian artist Mkrtich Tonoyan, whose mobility is conditioned by virtue of his citizenship, his economic situation, and his role within an extended family. Armenians need visas to travel to most countries, and Tonoyan's circumstances lie in stark contrast to my own. As a dual citizen of the UK and Canada, I experience a freedom of mobility unequalled by the majority of the world's citizens. However, as demonstrated by the UK Government's decision to leave the European Union, and global travel restrictions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, such freedoms are contingent and fragile. Cresswell's terminology of the "kinetic elite" and the "kinetic underclass" are useful to consider here (*On the Move* 255). Pre-COVID, Tonoyan and I both travelled extensively; we have worked together in nine countries since commencing

our collaboration, including three workshops as part of *<Immune Nations>*, in Canada (2015), Switzerland (2016), and Norway (2017). While we both share the social and cultural capital of movement, the forces of geopolitics shape our individual experiences: the reasons for our movement, the routes we take, the velocity and rhythm of our journeys, the level of friction our movements produce, and the overall experience of travel. While I travelled to the *<Immune Nations>* destinations with the ease of visa-free movement and direct flights, Tonoyan's travel was rarely smooth, burdened by the lengthy and costly process of visa applications, and indirect routes. Tonoyan has reflected on this situation as one that causes harm to his sense of professional self, as such frictioned mobility in relation to others translates into situations of professional unreliability (Tonoyan in Knowles 114). Perhaps most poignantly (and particularly so in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact of social and spatial inequalities), integral to the politics of mobility is the embedded question of its inverse—must we move? Tonoyan's international career as a contemporary artist necessitates the status of economic migrant, spending months each year in North America, Asia, or Europe undertaking opportunities for career development unavailable to artists within Armenia, where no formal arts funding exists, where infrastructure for contemporary art is limited, and with minimal visibility in the global contemporary art world. Negotiating geopolitical disparity, economic imbalance, and issues of mobility and cultural difference are the basis of the dialogue that informs our collaborative working relationship and the content of our dialogue-based practice, committed to social engagement and projects that are global in scope.

The most productive approach for addressing the problem my thesis set out to investigate emerged through encounters with the concept of translocality. Understood most simply as connections between specific locations, translocality began to gain traction in academic discourse in the 1990s within the context of furthering a theoretical discourse of grounded, situated, or place-based transnationalism. Translocality has been defined as a cross-disciplinary (or post-disciplinary) research perspective most associated with the disciplines of geography, anthropology, history, area studies, cultural studies, and development studies

(Greiner and Sakdapolrak 1). Geographers Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta argue for a multi-scalar understanding of translocality beyond the discourse of national borders and international migrations, enabling the term to be deployed as an expression of "simultaneous situatedness across different locales," with emphasis on communications and connectivity, no matter the proximity (4). It is Brickell and Datta's reading of translocality that my research employs, and in particular the evocative phrase "simultaneous situatedness." Their multi-scalar understanding of translocality enables translocal methods to be applied to connections and communication across the world, across town, or across the hallway, acknowledging that interconnectivities across boundaries are as likely to occur close to home in an urban encounter as they are across international borders.

"Translocal" is a term that has been applied in communications research to address simultaneous situatedness in networked communications and the space of the internet itself (Leppänen et al. 1081). It also operates as a highly apt descriptor of artist networks, projects, and practices that aim to bridge across locations and between people, and in this regard it is an apt descriptor for *<Immune Nations>*. An earlier example is *The Syndicate Network*, a platform for media culture and art that in 1997 spanned 31 countries across the West, former East, and adjoining Europe. Andreas Broeckmann, director of V2 in Rotterdam during the years *The Syndicate Network* was developed, provides this interpretation of the term: "Translocal means you are dealing with individual local situations but they are distributed within a larger geographical and cultural system. The global is locally embedded." I would add that in the translocal perspective the opposite holds equally true: the local is also globally embedded, with the global understood as the entirety of all local-local connectivity. Broeckmann goes on to describe *The Syndicate Network* as an "informal network" and an "intercom" for people in the media art community in Europe and beyond. "At the same time," he continues, "this intercommunication effects a re-mapping of cultural and mental territories that transcend the political, religious and territorial separations which we regard as a temporary nuisance, rather than as the last word on this imagined continent/container" (Broeckmann). Similarly, art historian Ewa Wojtowicz pro-

poses the online listserv and net art community *Nettime* as an example of a translocal artistic community, and a constituent element in these early years of network culture towards a project of art world decentralization. Like Broeckmann, Wojtowicz presents translocality as a postcolonial and resistant position that transposes geographic location to form new locales in the dispersed geographies of the internet (Wojtowicz). The aims that emerge from these writings of Broeckmann and Wojtowicz, examining the nascent years of network culture, suggest acts of cultural resistance towards disrupting the dominant narrative of free-market globalization. These projects present counternarratives that productively engage situatedness, connectivity, and a critical engagement with mobility towards re-mappings and alternative imaginings of global formations of communities. Inspired by these debates, we now see ourselves as artist/researchers working in and towards a translocal art world that is globally interconnected but operates as a counternarrative to the international art world, the label associated with the global commercial art market exemplified by art fairs, biennales, dealers, and auction houses.

Our commitment to translocal artistic practice responds to what Joaquin Barriendos Rodríguez proposes as the task of the translocal artist: the creation and distribution of critical and reflective articulations of multiplicity and global difference (352). For the kinetically elite artists and cultural workers with mobility-enabling passports, access to travel budgets, and the requisite social/professional networks—a set of conditions that certainly reflects my own situation situation in so-called normal times—global mobility has become the marker of success, and for some artists, a medium of creative practice in itself. Indeed, for artists who associate with the term "artist-nomad," mobility has become the preferred position for production. Art historian James Meyer unpacks the term into two differing approaches: the "lyrical nomad" characterized by a personalized, poetic, and subjective drift through the details of everyday travel-life, in contrast with the "critical nomad" who, Meyer contends, frames the nomadic drift in historical contexts, institutional critique, and frameworks of movement. Notwithstanding these critical distinctions and the uncertainty of how global movement may be disrupted longer term by Covid-19

and related economic downturns, we understand from Meyer that the practice of the artist-nomad is at root engaged with the act of travel (10). While Rodríguez presents the position of a translocal artist as a critical engagement with the *politics* of geography and representation, Meyer's definition of the artist-nomad even in its critical approach, is located in the physical mobility of the body of the artist. As Miwon Kwon identifies, a state of constant travel has emerged as an indicator—if not the key marker—of art-career success (46). From the limited sphere of the global or cosmopolitan art-world circuit and the position of the mobile artist, it can be easy to forget that most of the world's geography remains in the art-world margins, and for most of the world's population movement remains restricted anyway, whether by nationality or by economics. The identity and cultural capital afforded to the itinerant international artist-nomad (and the academic-star traveller could also be included here), is only available to the kinetically elite with the credentials to move and/or the personal/cultural circumstances to support movement beyond positions of marginality.

Translocality, as a counternarrative, positions connectivity, dialogue, the struggle to understand language and cultural difference, and engagement with the conditions and situations on the ground as essential and integral ingredients. It is a position that acknowledges that mobility is restricted or frictioned—or undertaken without choice as the result of economic migrancy—for much of the global population, and stands in opposition to the homogenization and globalization of culture. Wojtowicz's reference to situatedness—noted earlier—is important, as once again we see the inherent double meaning of situation: between geographic locale, and point of view with reference to feminist standpoint theory and situated knowledge. To position oneself as a translocal artist is to place oneself in networks of formation and situated points of view, and the flow of communication inherent in dialogues: between self and other, between communities, between perspectives, between local and global concerns, between the social and the technical, and between the geographic and the cultural.

THE TRANSLOCAL APPROACH TO DIALOGUE-BASED ART IN *VACZINENATIONS!*

My thinking on the translocal informed my approach to *VacZineNations!*, as did the interlinked and inter-informative characteristics that I proposed in my PhD research. In what follows, I outline the qualities that each characteristic facilitates, and how each characteristic is found in *VacZineNations!*

1. **Dialogues across difference** reflects an expanded definition of dialogue-based art that includes both face-to-face and mediated dialogues, and dialogue as a method of research. This characteristic works towards the production of spaces for a shared exchange of meaning across cultural and spatial difference and geopolitical/economic disparity, or a process that may lead to this. Local and global can be understood in relation to self and other (and self and self), a back-and-forth process of understanding the place of oneself in relation to broader or other contexts. Negotiating geopolitical disparity, cultural difference, and differing attitudes to the topic of vaccination were the basis of dialogues that informed our approach to *VacZineNations!*, through collaboration with Tonoyan and with colleagues and students in the UK, Canada, China, and Armenia. These working relationships, often undertaken across geographic distance, rely on an ability to transition smoothly across multiple communicative modes. As *VacZineNations!* developed collaboratively, it reflected a multimodal approach to dialogue, responsive to the networked conditions of 21st-century communications.

2. **A focus on the local in the context of global positions** that considers the conditions on the ground in the specific place/s, in dialogue with translocal and global contexts, networks, and systems. This characteristic develops thematics and modes of production responsive to the particular and specific issues of local contexts. Ideas of translocality encourage a consideration of individual locations not as separate places, but rather as nodes in social and technical networks that operate across a spectrum from personal, familial, and social links, to the forces of globalization that intercon-

nect systems. Most pertinent to the development of this characteristic is the proposition of translocality as a condition of "simultaneous situatedness" that acknowledges threads of connection between places near and far. *VacZineNations!* focussed on the local in the context of the global by encouraging participating students and artists to consider the inequalities of how and why the practice and policy of vaccination differs between geographic locations. The global is therefore understood as a condition that emerges from the density of translocal, local-to-local interactions across social and technical networks and systems.

3. **Circulations, movements, transfers, networks, and flows** reflect a critical awareness of the politics of mobility and fixity and a concern centred on the forces that control and constrain the flow of human movement. The notions of kinetic elite and kinetic underclass are key points of consideration regarding the conditions that mark the political dimension of mobility, and my critical awareness has emerged through my collaboration with Tonoyan, witnessing his near-constant struggle with the bureaucracy and anxiety of travel. Just as the politics of mobility fosters awareness of the constraints of human movement, so the attendant politics of human health acknowledges disparity of access to medical care globally. In *VacZineNations!* circulation, movements, transfers, networks, and flows were evident in the modes of production, such as the posters produced by students in graphic design at Coventry University in the UK and Central South University in China, who undertook the project together as part of an exchange program hosted by Central South in Changsha, Hunan Province. They were also evident in outcomes such as the form of our *small zines* project, as lightweight, easily transportable publications. These physical characteristics convey what was perhaps the most important outcome of the *VacZineNations!* project—namely, the critical awareness that many participants in the project increased their knowledge of vaccination as a contribution to health and well-being and their understanding of the inequities that restrict access to vaccinations for much of the world's population.

4. **A context-driven approach** provides flexibility towards enabling responses to professional and institutional requirements and can also be understood as the space of critical reflexivity in relation to the situation of the artist/researcher and the underlying contexts of practice. The pressing issues of *VacZineNations!* were shaped in response to the invitation to participate in the broader *<Immune Nations>* project, itself operating in the context of its funding requirements. I approached the project as an "artist/academic" working in the contexts of academic leadership, research, and teaching, and the particular pressures that apply to my context—for example, the requirement to engage in UK REF-able research outcomes.[2] Working across contexts runs the risk of failing to address the requirements of each agenda appropriately, but also the possibility to resist and reframe agendas through a critical and reflexive engagement with the contexts of practice. I characterize the context-driven approach as the meta-space for critical evaluation of the constraints and conditions that shape a given project, and the development of critical-creative responses such as this publication.

5. **A *made in situ* process with connections to communities** emerges from a dialogue between artists and specific locales with an exploration of themes and modes of production devised through dialogue and local encounters. This approach places the prefabrication of the international artist in tension with the situated production and meaning making of the translocal artist. Situatedness is approached through its double meaning as both locale and point of view, which are themselves unfixed and changeable. Thus, in such situated dialogue, viewed from the perspective of translocality, place (or *situ*) is understood as always located in ongoing and dynamic interrelations with other locales, as constituent nodes in an interconnected global world. *VacZineNations!* featured multiple sites of production in the UK, China, Canada, and Armenia, but this characteristic is most notable in its situatedness between art and health communities. To use the *<Immune Nations>* exhibition in Trondheim as an example, the opening reception (March 13, 2017) brought together two very different communities: students and staff from the Trondheim Art Academy, and internation-

al delegates from GLOBVAC, the annual Global Health and Vaccination Research conference, who attended the reception as their opening night event. Therefore, in this example, it was the meaning of the work that was made in situ through the site of its reception and the specificity of its audience.

6. **Collaborative, participatory, and distributed approaches to authorship** reflect a dialogue-based process of meaning making. This characteristic proposes consideration of collaborative dialogue-based practice between co-artists as they negotiate multiple and broadened perspectives, with the potential to detect and ameliorate the blind spots of singular or monologic perspectives. We approached *VacZineNations!* with consideration of the ethical implications of working in collaboration with others, both in terms of the governance of research ethics and the substantive issue of research integrity. *VacZineNations!* is acknowledged as a dialogue formed through collaborative engagement with others and the intellectual and creative labour of many. While efforts may be made to acknowledge participation and co-authorship, it nevertheless remains the case that collaboration is rarely equal, both in terms of contributions to the work, or the cultural, economic, or educational capital extracted from it. This is perhaps particularly relevant to complex messy projects such as *VacZineNations!* that aim to disrupt the hierarchy of professional and educational contexts.

7. **Multilinguality**, a constant aspect of the global context (and the national context in Canada), emerged as a characteristic in *VacZineNations!* with the process of identifying solutions in the complexities and challenges of communications in multilingual situations, understood as integral to the work of the translocal artist. Situations of this kind were multiple in *VacZineNations!*—the student exchange between Coventry University and South Central University in China being just one example. What emerged through *VacZineNations!* was an observation and understanding that multilinguality facilitates and represents not just communicative exchange across languages but also exchange across registers, methods, modes, contexts, and places, such as the difference in approach between students of visual arts and graphic design. Multi-

linguality in practice resists the singular narrative of homogenous globalization and the rigid boundaries of discipline. By aiming towards a position that embraces heterogeneity, the practice of multilinguality works to disrupt situations of cultural hegemony and the dominance of one cultural or disciplinary worldview over another. The risk inherent in adopting a multilingual approach is that spaces of multiplicity may extend beyond the intercultural competencies of participants and instead create frustrating (or boring) spaces of misunderstanding and exclusion. Literally, participants may be left out of the conversation. Therefore, in the work of the translocal artist, the multilingual characteristic operates most successfully in tandem with approaches that navigate the challenges of cultural difference through dialogue. Multilinguality, however, conveys a sense that such dialogue is more than a mere communicative exchange of linguistic information, representing instead meaningful interpersonal interactions and interdisciplinary encounters.

8. **Multi-scalar and multi-temporal approaches to dialogue** can be identified separately, but the connected nature of the spatial and the temporal has led to my understanding that multi-scalar and multi-temporal approaches to dialogue are most productively discussed through their interrelation. Each of the *VacZineNations!* projects revealed an approach that remained open to expansion and contraction. In considering dialogue as a time-based process of spanning the space between self and other, the multi-scalar approach encompassed multimodal communications between the *VacZineNations!* participants, artists, designers, educators, and students. These two interrelated characteristics of multi-scalar and multi-temporal approaches to dialogue are characteristics that contribute to a translocal practice position resistant to a singular and homogeneous narrative of globalization that places geographic locations along a unified timeline of progress. In *VacZineNations!*, scale was approached flexibly as a dialogue between local and global, with the micro understood through macro perspectives and vice versa. The multi-scalar dimension enabled the project to encompass multiple different works that span across the intimate in-

terpersonal to the complexity of the global, with time and space understood as culturally determined concepts.

9. **Risk, improvisation, and liveness** reveal an approach that reflects the precarity of uncertain outcomes intrinsic to liveness and improvisation, and the risk of working in multiple contexts. I see risk, improvisation, and liveness as integral elements in the work of the translocal artist and in particular in the interaction and negotiation between artists and other stakeholders. As artists and participants in *<Immune Nations>*, we embarked on a project with no clear sense of where the project would lead, and skeptical of the possibilities for artists, health policy makers, and immunologists to reach productive outcomes across disciplinary differences and knowledge gaps. This characteristic reflects that the improvisatory nature of research-based, interdisciplinary, and dialogue-based practices are risky business if we understand it as an approach to practice and knowledge production that opens people up to the possibility of transformational change. For the translocal artist, however, it is the meta-perspective on risk that is most pertinent—the understanding that a risky situation in one context is an everyday reality in another. This is a particularly pertinent characteristic in *VacZineNations!*, where information shared in relation to global vaccination practices between participant-students, from multiple parts of the world, revealed to them the gulf of difference geography makes to human health.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that the adaptability of this translocal approach to dialogue-based art, as demonstrated in *VacZineNations!*, may be of benefit and use to other artist/academics working in transdisciplinary projects and themes. I adapted extracts from my doctoral thesis to provide a reflection on how *VacZineNations!* addressed the global imperative to challenge vaccine hesitancy, through a translocal approach to practice-led research. Undertaking *VacZineNations!* through the methodology of the artist/academic, allowed me to integrate this international project into my academic

roles, and by doing so provide opportunities for others (collaborators, students, colleagues, and other participants) to engage in the learning and interdisciplinary creative thinking that the project enabled. I argue that *VacZineNations!* is a useful example of how practitioners can adopt the position of the translocal artist, and as such consider an alternative model for both research and art practices that seek to resist and disrupt singular or homogeneous narratives of globalization. Finally, I consider how the *VacZineNations!* project demonstrates and refines the findings of my doctoral thesis, a set of ten constituent characteristics of a translocal approach to dialogue-based art, revised to nine through this further research. These findings are offered as a contribution to the methodologies of art practice that operate critically within global society and as a resource to fellow artists and researchers to further adapt and evolve through dialogue, collaboration, and critical reflexive practice.

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NOTES

1. Editor's note: Alison Humphrey joined the project in the first year of her PhD in cinema and media arts at York University; Vicki Kwon was in her second year in the history of art, design, and visual culture at the University of Alberta; and Rachelle Viader Knowles was completing her PhD at Plymouth University, in art and media.↵

2. The REF, the UK Research Excellence Framework, is a system for assessing the quality of research produced within UK higher education institutions.↵