

# One Belt. Many Roads

VERSUCHSANSTALT in the WUK Projektraum

June 1 – July 1, 2023

In a collaborative experimental setting, *One Belt. Many Roads* investigates eight sites along China's "New Silk Road" global infrastructure initiative, examining the effects of neo-colonialism on these places, what new types of dependencies or geographies this entails, and which long-standing mechanisms of dependency are being replicated. The "Belt and Road Initiative", formerly "One Belt, One Road", is arguably the most comprehensive global project to accelerate the transport of goods between Asia and Europe (including Austria), by which China aims to declare itself the world's leading economic power. Various transportation corridors will be built for this purpose to achieve the necessary logistics, both on land (with a gigantic high-speed rail network) and on water.

In the VERSUCHSANSTALT of today's WUK, originally built as a locomotive and machine factory, eleven collaborators from nine countries, who have been working together since 2021, explore how toxic entanglements and their narratives have local and geopolitical impacts.

## Agung Kurniawan

Agung Kurniawan, an Indonesian artist and activist, deals with colonial wounds and their complex narratives, which are characterised by controversial politics, violence, historical taboos, and gaps. He negates linear modes of time, space, and action and exchanges them for multi-causality and temporality.

Drawing on the manuscript *Babad Pacina* from 1857, Agung Kurniawan created silhouettes for the windows of the WUK Versuchsanstalt. The artist uses images of historically forgotten battles in the book, which tells the story of the war between Chinese and Javanese troops and international soldiers of the Dutch colonial army. The war was triggered by the massacre of the Chinese population in Jakarta in 1740, which claimed the lives of thousands of people.

Indonesia still has the fourth largest Overseas Chinese community today. Java recognised all Chinese ethnic groups up to the point when Indonesia's colonial rule separated Chinese culture from the indigenous by adopting a policy of isolating residential areas based on ethnicity. The isolationist policy of the Dutch colonialists and failing to grant the Chinese in Java a social status similar to that of Europeans led to social tensions that continue to this day.

## Almagul Menlibayeva

The work of Berlin and Kazakhstan-based artist Almagul Menlibayeva revolves around water as a power-political resource and takes her home country as example.

For OBMR, she draws parallels between the Russian occupation and China's neo-colonial conduct in Kazakhstan, both of which have caused catastrophic environmental crises. The Aral Sea, once a thriving ecosystem, was destroyed by the diversion of water to supply industrial plants of the Soviet regime, clearly demonstrating the disastrous consequences of exploitative economic agendas. The ecocide had far-reaching effects on the socio-economic fabric of the region.

Lake Balkhash in central Kazakhstan is currently exposed to similar risks. It is fed by the Ili River, which emanates from China's Tien Shan Mountains. Now, the lake is plagued by water scarcity and diminished inflow. Practices reminiscent of the destruction of the Aral Sea threaten Lake Balkhash. With the expansion of BRI industrial sites near the border, China is prioritising its own water needs, resulting in a drastic shortage of water downstream. The mass migration of 60 to 80 million Chinese to the area, which is poorly supplied with water, is exacerbating the situation in the region. As a result, Lake Balkhash and its surroundings are suffering from increasing salinity and an unstable ecological balance.

In the videos on display, Menlibayeva advocates sustainable, anti-colonial practices and learning from the past in order to protect vulnerable ecosystems in a collective effort of care.

### **Behzad Khosravi Noori**

The Iranian artist and author Behzad Khosravi Noori, who teaches at the University of Karachi in Pakistan, presents a project proposal in the port of Ibrahim Hyderi in Karachi that is to be implemented in the near future. His research-based practice encompasses the history of the global South, labour and means of production, and the history of political relations that emerged as a counternarrative to the East-West dichotomy of the Cold War.

Together with local Sini boat makers, he plans to build a boat that will secure the livelihoods of 25 fishermen. The initiative is the result of a comprehensive study of the traditional fishing sector, industrial fishing, as well as the indigenous craftsmanship of local boat construction. The project investigates and hopes to establish a new type of economy in one of the oldest fishing harbours in the Indian Ocean, where the survival of local small businesses is severely compromised by mafia dependencies.

The research work is a continuation of his essay film for OBM 2022, which explored the colonial legacy of Karachi under British administration as well as the impact of Chinese economic treaties on local commerce in Ibrahim Hyderi.

To further enhance this initiative, the exhibition at WUK provides a public forum to trace the role of contemporary art in relation to transnationalism and to consider the potential of artistic practices to address social and economic issues.

### **Berhanu Ashagrie Deribew**

Against the backdrop of the ongoing violence and its impacts in his native Ethiopia, Berhanu Ashagrie Deribew conceives of “care” and “mourning” as political and social practices that can bring people together despite and because of their differences, and help to build communities amidst complex systems.

Based on the production of Chinese lanterns, the artist contemplates in his contribution to OBM 2022 what China seems to have achieved through their presence and intentions in the context of a decades-long economic partnership. It is an unstable relationship. A blurry alliance, full of uncertainties and weaknesses.

China invested in a number of infrastructure projects in Ethiopia, all of which seem to be working well at the moment, with no indications of failure. The amount of unpaid debt behind these developments remains undiscussed. In this light, the projects can be seen as a “hollowing out” scheme that sooner or later will only remain an empty promise, according to Berhanu Ashagrie Deribew.

Who are the “responsive” allies with whom we can play string figures?

In the game of *string figures*, pictures are made by crossing a string wrapped around the fingers. Therein, Donna Haraway identifies a “companion” practice that can outline an ethical system of epistemic consequences based on the persistence of never-innocent relationships.

The crossed strings in the installation symbolise these never-innocent relationships of vulnerable nations like Ethiopia.

### **Grammar of Urgencies/GoU**

Initiated by curator Maren Richter and artist Klaus Schafner, the collective is a multidisciplinary project and research platform operating in diverse spatial, geographical, and geopolitical contexts. Driven by the abiding realisation that the concept of “urgency” shapes the “now” in an increasingly direct and urgent way, they and their collaborators pursue multilayered or toxic assemblages that govern scales, times, bodies, and materials.

In 2020, GoU began to focus on the New Silk Road and in the following year invited eight collaborators to work with them on *One Belt. Many Roads*. In 2022, a first video prologue was produced.

The “sculptural” table in the Versuchsanstalt is the initiators’ contribution to OBM 2022 and forms the centre of the *Table Notes*, an event where all artists can come together and present their projects.

## **Hatem Bourial**

The Sicilian puppet is a witness. Centuries have passed, and this puppet is still there, watching the ships and ports at this crossing of the Mediterranean.

In the ports of Carthage and Tunis, it recalls Hannon the traveller, Hannibal the warrior, Ottoman soldiers, and the migrants of the present day.

It is a story of men and boats. It is a story about a topographical sea. It is a puppet between East and West, North and South.

Hatem Bourial is a Tunisian author, poet, and storyteller. For the first part of OBMR, he told the history of imperialism from the perspective of pirates past and present, a story in which the Mediterranean and Tunisia played an important role. The traditional Italian puppet opera that Bourial cites in his video conjures the history of the Crusades and the Christianisation of Arab lands, whereas the now famous character of Tunisian puppet theatre is a reference to the Ottoman occupation of Tunisia. With a good dose of irony, he illustrates the complex connections between culture, religion, and the mechanisms of power.

## **transparadiso (Barbara Holub and Paul Rajakovics)**

An interdisciplinary collective based in Vienna and Trieste, transparadiso realises works situated between art, architecture, and urbanism.

The port of Trieste is to become the BRI gateway to Central Europe, distributing goods coming from China at the intersection of two corridors – the Baltic-Adriatic Corridor and the Mediterranean Corridor.

The first short video draft *One Harbour, Two Corridors, Many Interests* was made in 2022, based on two photographs showing the entry point of the New Silk Road by sea (the huge container terminal of the New Port of Trieste) and its overland continuation via rail. The recently reopened train line from Trieste to Udine through the Karst region marks the beginning of the European BRI Baltic-Adriatic Corridor, which will cut an enormous swath of destruction through this unique landscape. Accompanied by a text that refers to the history of silk production, the video and the resulting textile work show how the two images are sewn together with a silk thread with a length of four kilometres in the end – the length that can be spun from a single silk cocoon.

Given the enormous scale of the New Silk Road and its incalculable effects, which transparadiso is currently exploring along the route from Trieste to Graz, *One Harbour, Two Corridors, Many Interests* is an attempt to tackle an almost impossible question. How can the promised benefits and the barely discussed losses be addressed when technical feasibility is the prevailing regime of our future?

## **Yara Mekawei**

Yara Mekawei is an Egyptian artist who explores and works with the materiality and immateriality of sound. For Mekawei, sound becomes a material source and a physical embodiment of knowledge(s), a space-time relation that she infuses with African and Arabic philosophy.

With its 7000-year history, Egypt has long been at the centre of global trade and situated on the axis of trade routes connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa. Egypt was well integrated into international trade thanks to two branches of the Silk Road – Alexandria to the north on the Mediterranean Sea and Berenice to the east on the Red Sea. These sites fed into the historic trade artery that transported luxury goods, in particular, to Europe. There was a connecting road between the two cities, forming a part of the bridge between East and West. Fustat, a former capital of Egypt and today located in southern Cairo, marks the archaeological site where most ancient Chinese ceramics have been found – more than in any other dig site along the Silk Road.

For OBMR, Yara Mekawei translates this historical relationship between Egypt and China into a sound installation. She applies a method for encoding and decoding ancient Arabic letters as digits, which flow together into a score for her musical and acoustic compositions. This process also entails a metamorphosis of the mythology, philosophy, and stories of Sufi prophets into new sonic readings.

## **Opening Performances – June 1, 2023, 8 pm**

### **Sainkho Namtchylak**

*Calligraphy of Sound* by singer, lyricist, and artist Sainkho Namtchylak, who hails from Tuva, an autonomous republic in the Russian Federation just north of Mongolia, is an act of live painting and singing that conveys the process of creating an image while the voice improvises – a spontaneous image and sound score emerges. Her music is a synthesis of traditional Siberian music, such as Tuvan throat singing, and Western musical styles. In 2015, Namtchylak released her album *Like a Bird or Spirit, Not a Face*, which she recorded with Eyadou Ag Leche and Said Ag Ayad of the Tuareg band Tinariwen. She currently teaches at the vienna poetry school.

### **Niels Plotard**

French sound artist and dancer Niels Plotard, who is already part of Grammar of Urgencies since 2022, embarks on a journey through OBRM's projects and themes in a sound performance. The artist captures spaces acoustically. His current project *opensound.network* – a series of sound performance installations in public spaces in Malta – creates collective listening experiences, which are the result of a research-based process focusing on specific sites and their (acoustic) ecology.

Texts: Artists and curators.

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