Anti-Offsetting Primer: Elena Agudio in conversation with Luiza Prado.

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Luiza Prado:

Elena can you introduce yourself?

Elena Agudio:

My name is Elena Agudio. First of all, I should say I'm a mother because that's probably the task and existential identity that takes up most of my time and energies at the moment but I'm also an art historian and a curator. I would like not to use the word curator, but so that we understand each other.

I'm somebody that likes to think with comrades and colleagues and to activate certain practices and thinking processes together. I'm an art historian, an Italian, white, maybe even middle-class. It is an important distinction to make. I moved to Berlin 15 years ago from Italy. Before that I did my studies here in Venice in Renaissance studies and then I did my PhD between Milan and Palermo. I moved to Berlin when I was just finishing. When I finally arrived in Berlin, I realised that the real labour and work that I had to embrace was one of undoing, deconstructing and challenging a very canonical education that I was given in the context of art historical studies. I was not yet curating and unfolding a curatorial narrative, so it was just what you're given and where you are taken by the people you meet along your educational path. Unfortunately, that was quite problematic, so it took me a long time to understand how to trouble what I was given, but also to understand how to position myself in such a messed-up context.

I met an incredibly inspiring group of colleagues at SAVVY Contemporary. I have been working and growing there for 10 years now, and the way have been collaborating and living together - in a very horizontal and caring way – still nourishes me on a daily basis. Since the beginning, my role has been one of co-directing, taking care of the programming, and curating. Being maybe a bit older than others, my role has also been one of supporting and mentoring people arriving and wanting to join the team: after 10 years, I might have gained a capacity of looking at our para-institution retrospectively, and hopefully also with an imagination forward because I have been engaged with this community of people for a long time.

Luiza Prado:

Maybe you can talk a bit more about SAVVY?

Elena Agudio:

First to say, I embody a particular positionality within a group of people that share different kind of identities. Mine was really one that brought me to confront but also to develop strategies of decolonisation, unlearning, feminist troubling and disruptive reflections and also one of pondering the asymmetries in the art world, but also within smaller constellations of people. My positionality tasked me to be always aware and very careful of these power structure and power dynamics.

I think it's very important to speak about what we do at SAVVY but at the same time not to romanticise the struggles that we perform and carry because we do that collectively. Obviously each of us have a different struggle. I've a much more privileged position, but as an Italian in Germany, I've been trying to relate to the history of diasporic (be)longing within a place that is welcoming but, also, quite harsh.

But let's get to the point of this conversation, and engage with what you asked me to speak about, dear Luiza: climate change and extraction. SAVVY was originally a counter-institution in the sense that it was really created and founded by my colleague Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung in 2009 to have a space where the possibility of unfolding a situated narrative was possible. I was saying counter institution because one of SAVVY's main aims was to rebalance a public discourse which was exercising a systematic epistemic violence against non-Western (and in particular black) artistic imaginaries. In Berlin, at the time, the context was quite progressive in institutions like the Haus der Kulturen der Welt or the Berlin Biennale, but for Bonaventure – who, as many of us in the cultural and art world doing other jobs to be able to pay our rents,

was still working as biotechnologist - it was clear that he was always invited as a guest, often as that 'other' that could talk about those artists down in the African continent. Of course, this was a very problematic and even unbearable perspective in which he was placed, so the only solution was to really get out of those kinds of frameworks and create a space that could have unfold in its own narrative.

At the beginning there was no support from the state or access to funding, but this was actually the moment in which the team started to grow. I joined in 2012, but the space was founded in 2009,. It was in a small flat in Berlin and it immediately had a very exciting performance program, exciting exhibitions and a discursive public program. Immediately many people started to participate, but also understand that we had an agency and a willingness to build something together and to make that practicing of togetherness possible.

For many years, we kept working mainly on a voluntary basis. We had a shared aim and goal, and we were overworking ourselves not to get out and be visible but to fight a certain art world that we didn't want to be part of. It took a very long time to get out of this precarious state, but in the meantime SAVVY kept building archives like the Colonial Neighbours archive on German colonial history (https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/pillars/colonial-neighbours/). Then we built the SAVVY.doc (https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/pillars/savvy-doc/) which is a huge archive where we collected very rare publications and historical journals from the Global South, such as ABBIA, or Presence Africaine, to mention just a couple among many.

These magazines are actually really difficult to find as a full series or access in the Global North *and* the Global South. I was recently talking to a colleague, a curator from Haiti, who is desperately wanting to come to Berlin for a residency because they cannot access these publications and archives because of the devastation, earthquake, disastrous economy, but also the climate. Books are not really easily kept safe in certain climates. We kept building these archives and doing our work and then slowly we got more financial support from the Senate of Berlin, from the Kulturstiftung des Bundes and from different German public funders. It took a long time for the funders to recognise that SAVVY Contemporary was doing important work. The real kick off point was when Bonaventure was invited to be one of the curators at Documenta. At this point, this politicians said 'okay, what they are doing might be important, we should check out what is this group of people is putting on the table' and so for the last five years we have managed to do more sustainable work. Things are now safer and more structured but to be honest it is important to say that we're still completely precarious, because the survival of a vital institution like SAVVY Contemporary still depends mainly on applications and project fundings.

Luiza Prado:

Thank you. This is already incredibly relevant to the project because a part of this Anti-Offsetting Primer that we're working on is dedicated to an examination of power dynamics in the art world. I'm calling a section of the Primer 'A Tower is Built a Tree Grows' because I'm thinking about these different ways of building things or growing things. I'm lucky enough to have known SAVVY for a few years and to have been involved with all of you and all of the amazing people that makeup SAVVY and I think this is such a key aspect of the contributions that you're making to the discourse in art and to the so-called 'art world'.

As you say, there's a very different kind of relationship to resources, financial resources, material resources, etc. when you are a small institution that needs to make do with within its limitations whilst big institutions are often fine, have very wealthy patrons and are connected to the very high levels of economic and geopolitical power. This is especially significant in all facets of the art world. When we think about the climate emergency that we are facing, that will become more difficult in the next few years, this is also a question that is deeply entangled with those relationships to power.

For instance, in recent years we've had a few important discussions, and I think significant moments, where The Whitney Museum was questioned about the presence of Warren B Kanders on its board due to the relationship that his company has with the manufacturing of tear gas and other artifacts of violence that are part of the border industry and police state. Tear gas, for instance, has a significant environmental impact on top of the human impact. Tear gas is actually deadly it's not a non-lethal weapon and so on and so forth. That's one case or, for instance, how arms dealers, in the case of Zabludowicz Collection are part of the art

world and funded institutions. When we think about mitigating the environmental impact of art activity it's really important to take that into account. It's easy to say 'we're going to fly less', but sometimes you need to fly to see your family if they live far away. I think it's not such a clear-cut question and it's not a question that can be reduced to just don't fly.

Elena Agudio:

SAVVY Contemporary is a counterinstitution, a para- or non-institution, or – as we all say in our team - an institution-in-perpetual-becoming. It was never in a privileged space that could give us the time or the capacity to think through all important details - when you're struggling to exist certain topics like environmental impact might not be at the forefront. But in a political way, they were always. In terms of the issue of funding, especially since we have been quite known, it would actually probably be easy to get the support from a millionaire here another millionaire there, but until now we've been surviving and developing our program by mainly getting public funding from the German state. This is also not the purest existing possible funding body, but one that pushes us to confront us with the public responsibility and the civic responsibility to shift discourses, to think through these ethics.

At SAVVY we are very aware and careful of the people we are working with. Not just because of what they sell, which kind of economy they are nourishing, but also which kind of sensibilities they ignore or support. It is about understanding the politics, affects and complex ecologies of living together in the world. The way in which SAVVY relates to practices of decarbonisation and engaged ecological sensibilities is actually really at a structural and infrastructural level, it is one of relating to each other, so it comes from a human level. How do we grow together? How do we relate to each other? How do we think through extractivism in an inter-personal level, especially and before anything else? How is toxicity a molecular thing that actually also happens between people. For example, we dealt with it a lot with *Agropoetics* , an exhibition and a project that I curated with Marleen Boschen throughout 2019. This exhibition was inspiring for me because of the connections that were activated as the heart of the project, but what we have been doing in ALL these years has been developing artistic strategies and understanding how care is the base for every possible understanding of ecological sensibility.

Of course, when we are talking about care and carework we end up considering that this is our major commons at SAVVY. As a group of diasporic beings whose families are far away, we all practice care and hold each other in many different ways. We nourish the interpersonal space as the ground to then be able to work together and nurture this very thick intellectual content *together*. This is not just a basis in a sense of the reproductive care that then stays aside, that is the unpaid labour, but is the food for our being together and through the very feminist practices that we try to enable. It's not too easy but it is fundamental that we do that. We also interrogate and undo exploitation of this care work. We really just see SAVVY itself as a space where care becomes our commons.

The sustainability of which we're talking really starts from this very human - and then becomes also immediately more-than-human - because it brings us to understand the importance of extraction, dispossession and labour. It sounds problematic because I told you before that we have all been working for free so it seems a contradiction, but this was exactly the labour that as a community we have been chosen to put together in order to start grounding a possibility of living together, and of doing all this intellectual and emotional work in togetherness.

Going back to *Agropoetics*, we tried to find moments of cross-pollination between artistic strategies and agroecological initiatives, tactics and groups of indigenous women that were striving to survive land grabbing and the violence they get as daily food. In a particular project like that, but I think at large, what we do at SAVVY is to look at this power dynamics—at the issue of extraction—from a molecular to a geopolitical scale. This happens quite organically because of the methodology, the way and the embodied understanding of the work we do. When we were working with these farming initiatives across different spaces and times during *Agropoetics* we actually connected all of them by creating a Telegram group that became a radio, together with Archipel Stations Community Radio. We were exchanging tactics through the sound recordings that we were doing, translating them in at least six different languages, simultaneously,

and the piece was another possibility for us to hold each other and learn from each other's strategies and struggles, but to find the possibility of cultivating spaces of emancipation and liberation together, even from afar. The project focused on the possibility of supporting possibilities of communal life in not just an anti-capitalist way, but in a space that puts this togetherness as a first thing that could enable possibilities of understanding precarity and how to make leaving possible in situations of ecological and economic devastation . Of course, there are very different levels, but this sharing of tactics has been very empowering. To reconnect this with SAVVY, what we have been doing as a community over the past decade has been to think through possibilities of repair. Not repairing all that is impossible to repair, but just practicing repair as a daily practice and fighting for restitution in a deep, ecological sense. It is a way of retrieving all the material and immaterial resources that have been taken away from certain communities. Restoring somehow that dignity that has been thrown away or destroyed for centuries by the Western epistemic and colonial system.

Luiza Prado:

For me SAVVY has been an art space where I have learned so much and it's changed my notion of what an art space can be. Everything that you said I think connects so beautifully with a conversation that I had a few days ago with Amazoner Arawak, who is part of a loose collective of 'artivists', which is what they call themselves, and I'm lucky enough to be connected to. They have a different conception of what art can be, what art can do. The artist Jaider Esbell had a gallery which he ran until he passed away last year. This was a space that reminded me a lot of Savvy when I visited in 2019. After his passing they've changed the space, so it is not where it was anymore, but they are continuing that work.

There's a few things that you mentioned when you were speaking just now that are key and I see all a number of connections. The space that Jaider ran was this collective space that was run on very few resources, and it was run by everyone who was there and at any given moment. We slept there, we swept the floors every day, every morning and made food for lunch, because there were always people passing by, students, local workers, who were just curious and wanted to see what was going on. All these different communities passed by Boa Vista. This gallery was located in the state of Roraima, which is the state with the largest Indigenous population in Brazil and there were people from different Indigenous groups passing by the city that dropped in to talk or to drink cassava wine. We read to each other every evening. It was a space of sharing and coming together. It was a commons. As you were speaking, I was thinking about this space as a place where people with different life trajectories, backgrounds, connections and understandings come together. When we talk about the 'art world', the exception to this rule are the big institutions because there are so many spaces that are art spaces like this and they're all over the world.

Elena Agudio:

And they are the ones that are nourishing these big spaces. Too often they are just cannibalised.

Luiza Prado:

Exactly and that is so significant. When we think about the art world in those terms that the big institutions are the exception. It is these collective spaces of care and affect that drives a space. Then, I think it also changes the entire structure or the entire perspective that you have to work from. From the moment that care and an affect are the terms of operation of a space or a collective, then you have to think about that place, even if you all come from different places and you have different life trajectories like I said. If you care about that person you have to care about where they come from, you have to care about the landscapes that are a part of their trajectories. You have to care about the histories that are part of those landscapes and therefore you have to fight to keep that alive and to maintain that to care for that, too, because that is part of the person and the community that you care about. I think that changes the operating principle from collecting, which is you know something that is part of the institutional mission of large institutions museums, and is about growing together.

Elena Agudio:

Thinking through the cultivation of spaces of cohabitation, emancipation, and liberation—this is truly what SAVVY has been and continues to do.

Luiza Prado:

It is it absolutely. Like I said it's changed me and so many people that I have brought to Savvy over the years. It's changed how they understand art. This is the kind of work that has had such wide repercussions, and these networks that remain and they're all over.

Elena Agudio:

We also have to admit we have been doing serious work for about a decade but that there are many collectives around the world, and especially in the Global South, that have understood that the labour of art is the sharing, cultivating and growing together, for much longer. This has become very evident now to everyone with Documenta15. It makes clear that artistic thinking, social and political engagement through artistic thinking, is very vibrant and it's happening all over the world. Big Western institutions instead are just institutions in ruination. They are ruins because they don't produce anything, they just extract and take. Of course, they make programmes and create support for engaged discourses but all within a certain perspective, which the one of a white supremacist system. Even when institutions try to be politically correct and change their image, their zeal is grounded in a certain complicity with the neoliberal market and its (no) ethics and tries to hide itself behind good intentions. This is clearly also collapsing because of too many contradictions.

I definitely agree with you that there are many energies, many bodies and especially those that are working in togetherness and that are believing in the possibility of inhabiting and cohabiting in a different way that makes possible that art is still a space where thinking and knowledge production is possible, otherwise would be just complete emptiness and formalism and boredom.

Luiza Prado:

Within the frame of sustainability, can you tell me about some particular practices you work towards at the gallery?

Elena Agudio:

I think it is important to mention the role that food has at SAVVY. In particular, cooking together and bringing all those stories that are entangled with cooking and interacting with all these molecules, species and all the witchcraft that is actually cooking.

We are always also very mindful about the usage of material that we do. We are mindful because we have very small budgets, but it goes together with our way of resisting extractivist patterns. We always recycle. We also think what can be reused within the community. We never waste.

This is compared to the attention that some institutions pay to marketing their programme as carbon neutral … but this is neoliberal terminology because it looks good but is just a façade. I think with us it is really at the basis of what we do, so it's just our way of thinking that is attentive to sustainability.

Unfortunately, we don't have a garden anymore. We used to when were in Silent Green. We started composting and cultivating our things, but now we moved into this space where there is no garden. It is a pity, but we do continue to do that as a community. We all have our own terraces, gardens, seeds and our economies and we exchange them. We keep supporting urban gardens, something that we started with *Agropoetics* when we were collaborating with agroecological initiatives, mainly those radical ones run by indigenous communities that are really fighting against the land grabbing but at the same time we also looked at the situated struggles in Berlin. In a non-metaphorical way, we looked at a few interesting initiatives of urban gardens who are always relocating and struggling to find and keep spaces and we keep following them and supporting as much as we can.

Luiza Prado:

I'm thinking about how nourishment is a fundamental part of what you are doing. It's a way of inviting way of inviting non-human knowledge so it is not only strictly human knowledge into your practice.

Elena Agudio:

Completely and learning from this non and more-than-human agency. We are always learning from the soil that's why we kept working with the soil and inviting artists that are not only looking at the soil but are really putting their fingers down into it. Apparently, just touching the soil and having your hands in it apparently gives you happiness. It is a chemical hormonal thing and I believe that.

It is not easy, because of the climate, because of the coldness of the weather in winter but also of the German 'environment'. This nourishment that is the one that is relational between us, as a group of people but also with plants, with food, with more-than-human and animal existences.

Luiza Prado:

Beautiful. I think that's a great way to wrap up this conversation it's a very rich path to think through and to continue reflecting. Thank you.