

Rosie Hermon

ENMESHED IN THE BORDERS: THE PARA-INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES OF ALTERNATIVE ARTS EDUCATION ONLINE

Abstract

This article takes up new online experiments in alternative arts education as examples of para-institutional practice, arguing that the online experiments discussed can be understood as enacting modes of border dwelling. In this context, the para-institution acknowledges and works with the tensions and compromises that exist in attempting to operate besides and beyond gatekeeping art world structures, rather than enacting a total refusal of these institutions. As an example of how these tensions play out in practice, the article focuses on the wiki *Mesh: a sharing hub for emerging artists*, initially developed out of the *Into the Wild* alternative arts education programme. *Mesh* was conceived by Esther McManus, who spoke with the author for the purposes of exploring the *Mesh* project as a case study for this article. In re-articulating para-institutional practices as forms of border dwelling within the ontology of the pluriverse, this article aims to demonstrate how borders of institutional practice are a fertile space to question the terms of the conversation when exploring institutional processes and parameters, as part of an ethically engaged project seeking more inclusive and pluriversal artworlds.

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Introduction

This text takes up new online experiments in alternative arts education as examples of para-institutional practice. In this context, the para-institution acknowledges and works with the tensions and compromises that exist in attempting to operate “besides and beyond” gatekeeping art world structures, rather than enacting a total refusal of these institutions through a passive strategy of exodus. As an example of how these tensions play out in practice, this text explores the wiki *Mesh: a sharing hub for emerging artists*. *Mesh* was conceived by Esther McManus and initially developed with the Into the Wild alternative arts education programme based in London. This text argues that the online experiments discussed, which explicitly or implicitly foreground the idea of the para-institution, can be understood as enacting modes of border dwelling in seeking more inclusive and pluriversal artworlds.

The reemergence of the para-institution

Para-institutional spaces exist besides and beyond the institution, forming alternatives while overlapping. They are peripheral and ad-hoc, part, but not part. They move beyond logics of extraction, remove barriers to accessibility, while embracing new models of knowledge transmission. (Cherry & Maloof)

This definition is the framing used by online programme *Dark Study*'s founders Cherry and Maloof in situating their “virtual first” approach to alternative arts education as a

para-institutional space. This is the definition that grounds the following exploration and discussion of how para-institutional practices negotiate the idea of refusal whilst actively working to effect change. Through such negotiations para-institutional practices reveal their potential to destabilize taken-for-granted, institutionalized routes towards building a creative practice.

Indeed, the para-institution recognizes the apparent difficulty of a total exodus from the institution. Instead, as Nikos Papastergiadis describes, para-institutional practices are “another line of struggle” in asserting the power of people as institutional constituents, and in creating an alternative to either being co-opted by the institution or “doing nothing”, within which exodus or disengagement is included as a passive strategy (Papastergiadis 104). The ‘para’ invokes the hinterland; meaning both beside and beyond, it is at once close by and out of reach. It can be further translated as nearby, next to, in comparison and in contrast (Sternfeld), evidencing its mutability as a term that can inhabit the interstices. Para-institutional practices are therefore active processes of rethinking or reimagining institutional practices, with the ‘para’ prefix being flexible and expansive enough to hold diverse forms, and so resisting a fixed notion of what para-institutional spaces should look like, where they should be located, or how they should behave.

The para-institution is not a new proposal. As part of the accelerated cycle within which neologisms and buzzwords are picked up and discarded within discourses of contemporary art, the use of the appendage ‘para’ in relation to the art institution was perhaps more prevalent a few years ago, being tried out in various forms before fading again from view. The para-institution has been particularly present in the curatorial practice and writing of Nora Sternfeld,

including through a para-institutions panel discussion she convened for documenta studien in 2018. It has also been taken up by other curators, arts organizers and writers, for example curator Megs Morley's 2014 research project with institutions in Galway and CP Schwartz's framing of *The Museum of Burning Questions* (curated by Sternfeld), in her text on the 2016 Bergen Assembly. It has further been applied to projects that are seen as part of the practice of a particular artist, for example Ahmet Öğüt's *The Silent University* and Jonas Staal's *New World Summit*. In each of these cases, the invocation of the para-institution is related to practices located primarily in physical space, which in different ways have responded to the "neoliberal version of the march through institutions", in which forms of institutional critique that are "imminent" to the institutions, are abandoned for the theorization and creation of alternative forms (Lüttiken).

Though they may not have been directly described as such, it is also important to note an ongoing allegiance between the para-institution and alternative arts education programmes as para-institutional forms. Both *Dark Study* and *Mesh* emerge out of this context, and in recent years there has been a proliferation of alternative arts education programmes which re-frame, re-imagine and challenge the arts university model, in response to the failure of the mainstream arts education system to address the needs and requirements of emerging artists, or to provide adequate access to all those considering pursuing artistic practice (Thorne). Recent iterations in the UK context, from which *Mesh* emerges, that could be described as para-institutions, include *Syllabus*, *Into the Wild* and *School of the Damned*, which is founded on a principle of labour exchange between artists and other artworld professionals (School of the Damned). However, the history of artist-led experiments with institutional forms

in relation to arts education, which begin to approach the concept of the para-institution, stretches far beyond current responses to the commercialisation of arts education. This history can be traced through experimental art schools and artist experiments with educational forms, which push at the limits of and overflow the arts educational institution. Examples include Black Mountain College in the US (1933-57), which "maintained a slightly disdainful relationship to the idea of a school or academy" (Thorne 32), and Joseph Beuys' Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research (FIU), which formed part of documenta 6 in 1977. Stemming from Beuys' belief that "each one of us has creative potential" and advocating a "spirit of democratic creativity" (Beuys & Böll), Beuys founded the FIU after he was dismissed from his teaching position at Düsseldorf for testing his belief in the latent creative potential of everyone, by accepting almost 150 applicants to his course.

Dark Study explicitly provides an alternative to MFA programmes, which it perceives as part of a broken system "designed to satisfy the demands of capital" (Woolbright). It focuses instead on the community-building capacity of education, in particular on serving the "underserved and underrepresented locked out of the racket of higher education" (Cherry & Maloof). Through mentoring, taught sessions and collaborative exercises delivered online, for free, to participants from multiple countries, *Dark Study* de-privileges technical training in favour of increasing literacy and critical interrogation of the operations of capital, class and empire in the economies and ecologies of contemporary art. The programme has been initiated by Caitlin Cherry and Nicole Maloof, artists and arts educators, who have drawn on their experiences within institutional settings in the formulation and delivery of the programme. It is through *Dark Study's* positioning of its

alternative arts education programme as a digitally-rooted para-institutional space, that my attention has been drawn back to the para-institution, precipitating a wider consideration of how the para-institutional and the online come together, and how the online context shapes the way in which the para-institutional plays out in this arena.

This marriage of the para-institutional with alternative arts education programmes and online technologies is perhaps not unexpected. Indeed, Ned Rossiter was exploring the potential of organised networks to rethink traditional institutional forms in 2006, positioning them as “transdisciplinary, distributive and collaborative” entities (13-14), co-emergent with online technologies. He argues that as institutions are a means of organising social relations, then the particular social-technical dynamics of online technologies inevitably “institute” new forms of sociality. Rossiter is particularly interested in how organised networks can reorganise education and challenge the university’s monopoly on knowledge, including through rethinking how educational resources are distributed as universities become more porous. He highlights the university’s own role in bringing about this situation, noting that “the advent of open education within an informational mode is conditioned by the crisis of the modern universities as they engage the neoliberal forces of commercialisation” (17) — and indeed, there is an important distinction to be made between employing online networked technologies as a means of enhancing accessibility, and as a cover for the outsourcing of knowledge production and “disassembling institutional frameworks” (30). However, Rossiter is more interested in how organised networks might align with independent educational networks, such as those run by migrants and activists, identifying organised networks as indulging “self-valorisation and horizontal collaboration”

(17), qualities embedded within many alternative arts education programmes that exist now, which are un-accredited and concerned with different distributions of knowledge and reshaping teacher-student relationships/hierarchies. Therefore, the movement of alternative arts education programmes, not only into online space, but towards being developed through available online technologies, could realise some of the promise that Rossiter claims for organised networks within the context of education, and disrupt established institutional structures by the use of the online, networked forms through which they are materialised.

Dark Study is not the only practice emerging out of a movement towards creating learning experiences and art worlds that are plural, inclusive and collaborative, led by their framing within online space. *Mesh wiki* is another such project that can also be described as centering para-institutional practice. Using *Mesh* as an example, I will break down how this project can be framed within the definition of a para-institutional space proposed by *Dark Study*, which is as a programme that is already consciously positioning the idea of the para-institution within this alternative arts education context, in order to explore the ongoing process of creating the para-institution and the tensions inherent in this. This includes how it is at once entangled with, but also moves beyond current institutional practice in its exploration of an alternative.

Mesh: a sharing hub for emerging artists was conceived by Esther McManus as part of her role as Artist Interpreter for the *Into the Wild* programme. McManus is a graphic artist and educator, with an interest in peer learning and support that emerges, in part, from her own experience within the zine and self-publishing community. *Into the Wild* is based at Chisenhale Studios in London, and is an alternative arts education

programme for artists in the first few years of professional practice. It is a programme that I coordinate as Artist Development Manager for the Studios, although the programme itself is artist-led, curated and facilitated by artist Sophie Chapman, with input and additional programming by the participants. It is a critical space to practically explore forms of artistic production that challenge dominant perceptions about individualistic advancement through the art world, in favour of more collective, mutually supportive ways of being and practicing. This approach was the impetus that drove the creation of the Artist Interpreter role. It was a means of creatively communicating the knowledge and experience shared by artists and artworld professionals involved in the programme, to disrupt the idea that access to knowledge should be exclusive, only available to the small cohort that *Into the Wild* is able to support as programme participants.

Mesh exists as a wiki site and programme of online ‘hackathons’ conducted over Zoom, which create moments for artists to come together to learn how to work with the wiki, to add to it and discuss it. The wiki was designed and constructed through a process of collaboration with participants of *Into the Wild*, with Esther McManus ensuring “that the group’s genuine priorities were represented”. It continues to be managed by a small group of *Into the Wild* participants, Matilda Glen, Niklas Gustafson and Zaneta Zukalova. Since its launch in May 2020, it has been added to by artists and arts workers involved in alternative arts education, through a process that McManus describes as “individuals coming together to share trusted resources”. Indeed, the purpose of *Mesh* is to build a resource, created by and for artists, that focuses on information that can support them to explore their practices outside of an institutional framing, or in making connections “between their local art

ecosystem and a broader national network of people who have a similar interest in grass-roots and self-organized” modes of working. To this end, it is divided into three main sections that promote self-directed learning and investigation: networks (an atlas of local resources and spaces around the UK); resources (templates and practical how-to guides); and inspiration (creative activities and recommended readings).

There is a lot within the idea of the para-institution that *Mesh* can be identified with, but McManus points out that the reality of working with *Mesh* and trying to build a community around it is not straightforward, and some of its para-institutional ambitions remain the ideal that it is working towards, rather than the current reality of trying to construct *Mesh* as a resource and community.

In order to understand how *Mesh* can be framed as employing para-institutional practices, and how such practices operate online, it is useful to explore how it functions in relation to the key facets of para-institutionality highlighted at the outset; how each of the four strategies, methods or ways of being identified in the definition at the start of this piece, contribute to a mode of operating “besides and beyond” the institution. These key areas are: “forming alternatives while overlapping [...] peripheral and ad-hoc, part but not part”; moving “beyond the logics of extraction”; removing “barriers to accessibility”; and “embracing new models of knowledge transmission” (Cherry & Maloof). I will examine each element in turn, drawing on McManus’ thoughts and reflections about *Mesh* in this process.

Forming alternatives while overlapping — peripheral and ad-hoc, part but not part

Mesh exists within the space between the art school and the arts institution, in recognition of the limits of both of these gatekeeping structures, and born out of a desire to create alternative ways of working and connecting by early career artists. It situates itself within the interconnected fields of art practice, arts education, self-organized communities and artist development. Whilst there are other online resources built by individuals and groups for the benefit of artists, the concern of *Mesh* is to bring things together without attempting to 'reinvent the wheel' by replicating what might already exist elsewhere. The wiki form through which, in theory, anyone can contribute to the site embodies ideas of flattened hierarchies and distributed authorship. This means there is a productive messiness 'inherent' in such a project, which, as McManus describes, is "always in a state of development". *Mesh* moves beyond being an online resource, towards attempting to build a sense of community through its hackathon programme, creating opportunities to 'tangibly' come together, as part of the ongoing, reflexive conversation about the developing use of the wiki; it is a space of feedback, critique, support and for creating moments of working with common purpose between a group of geographically dispersed individuals. The value of the "passage of time" is also important to McManus and influenced her conception of *Mesh*, as she prioritized the creation of an online space that could function beyond the constraints of "institutional, programmatic timeframes". Thus *Mesh* reflects the reality that creative

ideas percolate across the whole range of timescales, and that learning is an ongoing process; knowing that there is a space that one can return to, as and when particular information is needed.

Whilst creating its own framework and methodology of practice, *Mesh* is directly connected with arts institutions beyond Chisenhale Studios through which it originated. Since its launch *Mesh*, increasingly operating as an independent project, has made connections with other arts institutions involved with artist development, particularly individuals working in institutional contexts that have engaged with, shared and contributed to the wiki, who are themselves concerned with the difficulties and barriers to accessing institutional support and expertise. These individual champions of *Mesh* are often acting simultaneously in an institutional and a personal capacity, blurring the distinction around where the borders of the institution lie when interacting with the wiki. However, there remains an inherent tension within the relationship between *Mesh* and the institution; *Mesh* exists within a space that is not held by an institution, but there is some recognition that it needs to continue to draw upon institutional support to sustain itself (in terms of developing audiences, drawing on expertise and potentially accessing funding). It therefore must negotiate this relationship with the institution without compromising the reason that it exists.

This can be seen as a fundamental paradox within para-institutional practice, that a project that is actively seeking an alternative beyond the institution, is at least in part reliant on the validation that institutional association can bestow. In the case of *Mesh*, this tension is also revealing of the concerns of emerging artist communities, for whom institutional endorsement holds great sway, "even if people aspire to or desire to not care so much about those things, or to reject those

things". McManus values what continued institutional engagement and support from different institutions could bring, particularly in its potential to raise the visibility of *Mesh* so that more artists can access it. However, there is a need to be mindful of the risk of becoming merely a promotional tool for the institution or institutional signifier.

Although *Mesh* has a need of the institution for support and visibility, the institutional engagement in its development and delivery highlights a recognition of the need for such a resource. It also brings with it an awareness that, as McManus says, the experience of institutional engagement "is not going to be a lot of people's experience of being an artist, or an emerging artist" — *Mesh* could therefore be seen as a vicarious form of institutional access. Indeed, in its position at the borders or peripheries of institutional practice, operating in a somewhat parasitical fashion, *Mesh* highlights the precarious status of the para-institution, of being both part but not part of institutional practice, where a withdrawal of an extended network of institutional support, risks it lapsing into inertia and dormancy. In its precarity it mirrors the community for whom it exists, and the peripheral status that many emerging artists might feel in trying to develop a professional practice, particularly if located outside areas that boast a lively art scene. Anna Tsing defines precarity in terms of "being vulnerable to others", of being "thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as others", where the status quo cannot be relied upon (20). In this sense, *Mesh* both attempts to create a space where those vulnerable to the vagaries of the art world can temporarily anchor themselves, whilst also embodying this state of flux as a shifting assemblage of information that has the potential to both remake and be remade. In this way there is an interconnection between the form of *Mesh* as a wiki and para-institution, and the potential form and politics of its intended community.

Moving beyond the logics of extraction

Mesh is grounded in an ethics "of sharing and openness, but also of giving credit", promoting an ethos of mutuality over the extractive logics that underpin global capitalism through which resources are exploited for profit. Instead, *Mesh* is creating a resource and community that aspires to be self-generating, altruistic and self-sustaining. Contributors' additions can be contextualized and personalized by their authors in a way that might be less common within other resources, or when information is shared and re-shared via social media, as *Mesh* gives space to individuals to explain why a particular resource is valuable to them when they upload it. They can share what they know or find useful, whilst at the same time drawing on the information within it for their own practice. McManus' aim is for *Mesh*,

to connect with the fact that everything that appears on there, has been produced by a person who is part of your community, and this is part of a conversation of people who are doing things. So I wanted it to be a really human space where things are up for discussion, but also people are seen and valued for what they're doing.

Although it is down to individual perception, McManus implies that ideally, adding to the wiki should feel like participating in and contributing to a community of interest. It is not extractive in the same way as social media, in which individual contributions power a system that generates profit for others, and where many of the contributors may not recognize their input as labour towards this end. As a wiki, it is also possible, though not

compulsory, for contributions to *Mesh* to be credited (though they can also be anonymous), which is important in giving visibility to the time and effort taken to make a contribution to the site. Having said that, there is some tension between the ideal of many people contributing and being responsible for small pieces of information, and the present reality of a small number of people, who really believe in the value of this project, working to update and maintain the space, and to build a programme around it. McManus feels that at this point the amount of voluntary labour that people are contributing in their free time can start to feel more laborious. This is why currently the group managing the space is seeking funding to develop a programme of events around the site, which can help to shift the model away from its reliance upon them, by engaging a larger group of participants; building a community that will enable it to move towards an administrative structure that is aligned more closely with its ethos of mutuality and distributed responsibility.

Within the frame of non-extractive logics, it is important to note the use of non-proprietary software and the publishing of all information under a creative commons license. Information on the wiki can be freely taken and adapted to the needs of the artists that require it. There is often a gap between the ethos proclaimed by not-for profit arts organisations and their use of proprietary software provided for 'free' by tech conglomerates in Silicon Valley, which arts and technology non-profit Constant vzw describe as "the elephant in the room". But although meetings take place via Zoom and marketing happens via social media, *Mesh's* non-extractive ambitions are aligned to its form through the core software that gives it its identity. This demonstrates the potential of online forms as spaces within which para-institutional practices can flourish.

Remove barriers to accessibility

However, use of the wiki software brings with it issues around the accessibility of *Mesh*. Whilst the wiki is open access, and the purpose is to remove barriers to accessing information and resources to support artists, the intended audience and communities do not necessarily have the digital literacy to allow them to easily engage with and participate in *Mesh*. From the experience so far, many don't find the technologies "obvious or easy, and it can be quite intimidating, and it takes time and interest". McManus feels that the unfamiliarity of working with wikis is a barrier for people and one of the stumbling blocks of converting a lot of the enthusiastic reception of the project into ongoing engagement; that it's "offering a lot of things on paper" that people feel are incredibly important, "but the way you connect is quite alien, and it's missing something of those things that bring the really good feelings of community".

This is where the online hackathons are particularly important. Hackathons have become partly a space of instruction, where attendees are talked through the process of creating an account and adding content. This happens as a group, but also through Zoom breakout rooms created to help individuals that are struggling to get to grips with the technology. McManus admits that it's "laborious", working with one person for over an hour to help them upload one piece of information, but it feels important in ensuring that *Mesh* is a resource that is genuinely accessible to the artists that could benefit from it. As such, the hackathons also become a research space to learn about *Mesh's* ongoing use from these people and the difficulties they encounter, to get a better sense of "what's working or not, what needs

improving”, which is also part of developing the accessibility of the site. This project of increasing accessibility also extends beyond technical support for artists to access the site, as it is acknowledged that accessibility is not just about digital literacy. Therefore, it is hoped that funding can be secured to consider accessibility in the round, including how the information uploaded is presented through the site to make it more accessible to disabled and neurodiverse artists. In this way the *Mesh* project demonstrates its genuine concern with getting the information out there, and trying to make sure that it is available to everyone equally who wants to engage with it. Ultimately McManus’ hope for *Mesh* is that “it can be empowering for people” and that a trustful community can be built around it, which is accepting of its inability to replicate the immediacy of other online communities or tools that are centered on communication rather than publishing.

Embracing new models of knowledge transmission

From the perspective of the para-institution, the shift to online-only already signals an embrace of new (or at least newer) modes of knowledge transmission, which have notably proliferated within the last year. However, within this online framework, *Mesh* aspires to create a new way for artists to orient themselves within the flood of information online, through the perspective and experience of others. It is based on the premise that if a piece of information is useful or inspiring to one artist, it may very well be useful and inspiring to another, even if in a completely different way. As McManus notes, “information on the internet is not hard to come by, but understanding why it might be of use to you is

valuable”; being able to turn to personalized and trusted resources can “cut through the noise”. It is a place to pay it forwards, where there is no instant gratification for having shared something, only the hope in its future relevance and use to others. This is therefore a speculative model of knowledge transmission, delinked from the capitalist logic of working for profit or immediate gratification, and instead premised on an extended solidarity and altruism towards unknown peers. However, the promise of *Mesh* lies in the as yet unanswered question of how far this solidarity does actually exist, and whether it can generate enough of a community around it to sustain the “liveliness” that it has started to generate through the hackathons, towards a more developed use. It can only really sustain itself, without the institution, through becoming “the responsibility of many people”, but there is certainly an openness to thinking about the different models that could be employed to realize this ambition, including (and conversely) via a developing association with different groups and institutions.

Para-institutions as border dwelling?

From establishing *Mesh* as engaging in para-institutional practices, and thinking about the realities and concerns of para-institutional spaces online, I am now interested in exploring a wider contextualization of online para-institutional spaces of alternative arts education and the potential of their re-articulation as modes of ‘border dwelling’, following Walter Mignolo’s theorizing of this term.

Border dwelling, or border thinking, is a method for inhabiting the interstices of a pluriversal world. For Mignolo, pluriversality is an ontological rejection of Western

universalism as a totalizing project, in favour of “viewing the world as an interconnected diversity” (“Forward” x). Within the ontology of the pluriverse, multiple cosmologies exist simultaneously, which are entangled through a “power differential”. Mignolo identifies this power differential as the colonial matrix of power, a perpetuation of colonial logics through the rhetoric of modernity. From this ontological position, one in which the world is an entanglement rather than a collection of independent units, Mignolo identifies a need for “a way of thinking and understanding that dwells in the interstices of the entanglement, at its borders” (“Forward” xi); an epistemology that recognizes that knowledge is formed through these entangled cosmologies. He proposes border-dwelling as such an epistemology. For Mignolo, the border-dweller occupies an often-uncertain societal position and transcultural experience; “the people who dwell in the borders are the migrants from Africa, west Asia (the so-called Middle East), and Latin America, predominantly” (“Forward” xi). Mignolo’s own experience of border dwelling is as an embodied, reflexive praxis through which he can negotiate (and write about) different Western and non-Western cosmologies as “a way and a method with infinite possibilities and permutations, to be sure, not constrained or prescriptive in its direction” (“Forward” xi).

So how and why should para-institutional practices within the field of alternative arts education be considered as a form of border-dwelling? And why is it appropriate to apply this border epistemology that emerges from decolonial theory in South America to such alternative arts education projects arising in the West? Whilst the experience of the border within the para-institution is not equivalent to the transcultural experience of the migrant, in thinking with the context of what it means to be a border-dweller within an institutional context, there are resonances

in the embodied process of navigating the uncertain position of the “beside and beyond” of the institution, whilst remaining part of an institutional entanglement at a conceptual and practical level. What’s more, Mignolo’s border epistemology actively works against the “territoriality of the disciplines” which is based in the colonial epistemology from which modernity emerges (“Forward” xi).

Similarly, alternative arts education models often offer programmes untethered from discipline specificity, for example as *Dark Study* directly addresses the pervasive impact of empire on contemporary art, or as *Mesh* gives space for contributors to add whatever information or activities they have found useful or valuable, explicitly making ‘Sorting Pile’ and ‘Wiki wish-list’ pages to accommodate content that might overflow or demand a redrawing of existing categories. What’s more, alternative arts education programmes are already a refusal of the (Western) universalism embodied by the university system in their active envisioning of alternatives and, in addition to working against the territoriality of the disciplines, they often work in opposition to the gatekeeping practices of arts education institutions, particularly in relation to who can participate, and what success looks like. As *Mesh* participants state, “we’re exploring ways of coming together, shaping our own artworlds and developing alternative notions of success” (*Mesh*). Thinking about the artist as a border-dweller in this context also acknowledges the often ambiguous status of the artist in society as negotiator and communicator of cultures.

Whilst engagement with the online is ubiquitous and therefore cannot be described in general as existing at the peripheries, within practices of arts education and the arts institution the online might still be described as a border space; even within practices of alternative arts education, which tend to foreground the social as it is enacted

through bodies coming together IRL. The (para)refusal of the conceptual and architectural 'certainties' of the institution for the online space is therefore a movement to the border. This is not a retreat. The proposition here is that there remains a capacity to build alternatives online, all the while negotiating the entanglement with the institution, in its various forms (as the art school, as the art gallery or museum). Although *Mesh* is nationally based in terms of the directory it has started to compile, the 2021 *Dark Study* cohort are attending from the US, Ghana, Mexico and China, and indeed *Mesh* hackathon attendees have included contributors from Romania and India, demonstrating the increased capacity for transnational porosity of these projects over physically sited alternative arts education programmes.

Towards the Pluriverse

In reframing para-institutional practices as practices of border-dwelling, and thereby locating them within Mignolo's border epistemology, it is possible to think them as part of the pluriversal project, creating an understanding of a pluriversal world through the experience of entangled knowledges gleaned within the borders.

Mignolo is clear that the process of constructing the pluriverse is a project of conceptualization through thinking and doing, both within academia and through communal projects; it is bottom-up, emerging from grassroots organising and through struggle; the ontology of the pluriverse creates space for plural practices, for alternatives. Crucially, Mignolo insists that the pluriversal horizon,

is a space where changing the terms of the conversation (and, by changing the terms and reorienting the content of the conversation) is an ethically engaged project. By ethically engaged I mean that it puts institutions at the service of the people rather than people at the service of institutions, which was the spirit of westernization ("On Pluriversality" 107).

This emphasis on placing institutions at the service of people sits at the heart of para-institutional practices. It is evidenced by the para-institutional emphasis on accessibility, new models of knowledge transmission and breaking away from extractive processes, which do, as Mignolo highlights, co-opt people to the service of institutions. Dwelling at the borders of institutions is therefore a fertile space to begin to at least question the terms of conversation and to work through the tensions that arise when reworking institutional processes and parameters as part of an ethically engaged project. Mignolo argues that "there is much we can and should do to create long term alternatives and pathways toward a life of communal horizons" ("On Pluriversality" 112), and para-institutional experiments online, I would argue, are a tentative step down that path.

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