Imants Tillers

'Post-colonialism', 'globalisation', 'the global network' – these are rapidly becoming the new catch-phrases of the 90s. The Italian art magazine 'Flash Art', always quick to respond to fashion, now puts on its cover an image which it supposes to engage the concept of 'Global Art'. Also in Australia, we recently witnessed the arrival of a new magazine, provocatively entitled 'World Art'. We all know that headquarters is no longer Paris or New York but how can it be Melbourne, where 'World Art' is now published? What if similar publishing enterprises are under way in a number of other equally peripheral cities? In the opening up of the vast new image field we cannot assume that the new players want to necessarily be passive, compliant, democratic or well-behaved. I don't want to suggest for a moment, that the art world would necessarily follow the same trajectory as some recent post-communist social trends, notably the growth of a global mafia with the most feared criminal elements now being those originating from the former Soviet Union. However, the new groups or individuals who suddenly become visible may want to take centre stage, whether their launchpad is Melbourne, St. Petersburg, Papunya or Auckland, and hijack the discourses. In Australia for example we have seen the unexpected, meteoric rise of Aboriginal art which in the last 3-4 years has totally eclipsed the work of white contemporary Australian artists, not only in the international arena, but at home too. Aboriginal art in its myriad forms must now be considered mainstream Australian art – a most unlikely scenario even ten years ago.

Colonised, marginalised, peripheral cultures feel angry, dispossessed and given changed circumstances can be out for revenge: the proverbial Revolt of the Margins. I am quite familiar with the situation in Latvia for example, whose small population of indigenous people have been colonised for at least 700 years yet through an extremely resistant character have managed to keep their language and aspects of their ancient oral culture intact. It is fascinating to discover that the Baltic Germans who were the rulers in this area of the Baltic from the 13th century following its conquest by the Teutonic Knights, regarded the area as 'wilderness'. Indeed Baltic German authors sometimes used the expression 'das Unland' to describe the region. This term in a sense suggests that not merely were the pagan inhabitants less than fully human, but the land was not really the land; it only became 'land' in the full sense when developed by the Christian Germans. The parallels with colonial Australia and the British concept of 'terra nullius' are striking.

Then there is the issue of the colonizer's language and the control exerted through the naming and renaming of places. In James Breslin's recent biography of the American artist Mark Rothko, I noted that his birthplace Dvinsk in Russia is actually the Russian name for the Latvian town of Daugavpils on the River Daugava and that when he left for America he sailed from the port of Libau, the Russian name for my mother's birthplace Liepaja. Evidently Rothko's childhood memories of his Latvian part of Russia which is what it was in the early 20th century was something he often referred to. Breslin makes the point that the diffused light in this northern part of the world is something that inhabits Rothko's abstract paintings. 'The Latvian painter has a special love for diffused outdoor light which seems to penetrate the bodies and emanate from them', 'a light that reappears within Rothko's paintings, an illumination

glimpsed through a hazy doorway or window, a light longed for but beyond reach.' In our post-colonial world we can find this light also in the work of another Latvian-born artist, Vija Celmins, currently the subject of a major retrospective in the United States.

'Postcolonialism' carries strong and valid emotions associated with past historic injustices often with subtleties and complexities which easily evade outsiders. We should not assume that the artists who engage with the colonial histories of their own countries will necessarily be thankful or respectful of the forces within the artworld which promote their visibility. As the Latvian poet Zinaida Lazda once put it: "In this land by the River Daugava and by the sea we are to live out our days in sorrow and joy. With hatred we will answer the enemy who comes to humble and to plunder our native land."

Multiply this valid sentiment by all the small countries and distinct ethnic groups emerging from a colonized past and we have a formula for large-scale chaos. But on the other hand the artists from these countries have a readymade and often profound content to their work and an urgency to express it which is often lacking in the West. As Norbert Weber, the artistic director of the Baltic Sea Biennale in 1992 at the Rostock Kunsthalle puts it: "For the first Biennale to be held in Rostock after the great political upheavals in Eastern Europe this open-mindedness was not only an obligation but represented a true chance. Our confrontation with a truth that transcended mere aesthetic presence made the issues of the Western art market seem comparatively secondary. In view of the timeless yearning for happiness (for example) reflected in the faces of the childeren in Valts Kleins' photographs, every attempt to present only the latest innovations of a hyped-up scene appeared absurdly beside the point. Our eyes were opened for a meaningful involvement with the content of art."

I might add that this situation also applies within Australia with the aborigines who are only now beginning to successfully emerge from a colonial past of 200 years – thus the work of an artist like Gordon Bennett has particular poignancy for us at this moment. But add together all these new artists and their specific cultural and historical contexts and one can see that the new visible global cultural environment is one of unprecedented complexity – one which could be characterised as a 'turbulent field'.

Fred Emery in his book 'Systems Thinking' explains that the dynamic properties of turbulent fields arise not simply from the interaction of identifiable component systems but from the field itself. Turbulence results from the complexity and multiple character of the interconnections. Individual organisations (or individuals) cannot adapt successfully simply through their direct interactions since they cannot predict the size or consequence of the actions they set into train. We could certainly view the new global situation (since the fall of communism) politically and socially as a turbulent one. This situation seems to be echoed in the art world. In addition one of the factors pertinent to the new global art world I am particularly aware of (since I draw on the vast mass of printed images in circulation for my work) is that the radical increase in speed, scope and capacity for communication results in a quantity of information received at such a rate that it can scarcely be processed, not to speak of making decisions on its basis. As more and more artists plug themselves into a global framework (and there are increasingly more and more artists), this will be the causal environment in which

they will also find themselves.

Since the early 70s, however, there has been a scientific revolution in our midst - Chaos Theory. It is a science which relates neither to the very large (as does the Theory of Relativity) nor to the very small (Quantum Mechanics) but to events and processes at our human scale. Chaos Theory in fact comes out of the study of turbulence and the behaviour of complex natural systems such as the weather.

One of the first and most amazing discoveries of Chaos Theory is the so-called Butterfly Effect – the notion that tiny differences in the input into a complex system can produce overwhelming differences in output – which embodies the rather poetic notion that a butterfly fluttering its wings today in Beijing can transform storm systems next month in New York. The Butterfly Effect has acquired a more technical name: sensitive dependence on initial conditions. This principle also seems to apply to all sorts of other phenomena including cultural phenomena.

As a cultural theory, Chaos Theory certainly empowers marginal and peripheral artists and introduces some instability into the rational and tyrannical logic of provincialism – the hitherto persuasive argument that the cultural peripheries are powerless to resist the agendas and hierarchies of the cultural centres. Through a twist of fate, a chain of events, a magnification of effects, they could be determining the agendas of those so-called centres.

Chaos Theory might also have application at the more specific level of an artist's oeuvre. One might recall the German critic Wolfgang Max Faust's writings in 1981 referring to the neo-expressionist works of artists like Dokoupil, Dahn or Kippenberger: "wide ranging image consumption and regurgitation results not in the death of the author but his or her fragmentation – the wilful dissociation of subjectiveness and style – the image has become the site of a transient fascination that represents not the unity of one ego but a multiple subjective view. Each painting becomes a battleground, an arena of conflict where the artist's visions and longings face a showdown with his or her knowledge of art history. A momentary irritation caused by some picture from a magazine or television ad, or an art book or a dream battles with a need to make an image that is authentically of and about the self."

In hindsight, after Chaos Theory, one could reinterpret this relationship of the artist to his or her sources and to his or her artistic productions as a complex system which is being pushed to edges of chaos by the turbulence of the surrounding image field. In the early 90s we could argue that the image field has become even more turbulent.

Ilya Prigogine (a Nobel Prize Winner in 1977 for Chemistry) and Isabelle Stengers have made further advances in this fertile area of recent scientific theory in their book 'Order out of Chaos'. The book contains some incredible insights and bizarre propositions which seem to have relevant implications for the new global art world in which we now find ourselves. In this paper it is only possible to touch very briefly and superficially on some of them but I recommend this book to everyone here. Their ideas are certainly beginning to seep through into many other disciplines beyond their field of chemistry – the most recent example being a reformulation of Darwinian evolution in the light of their approach. The key idea in 'Order out of Chaos' is that in 'far from equilibrium conditions" (i.e. at the edge of chaos) not only can small imputs yield huge startling effects (the so-called Butterfly Effect) but the entire system may suddenly and spontaneously

reorganize itself in ways that strike us as bizarre. The argument is based on observations of certain chemical phenomena and the implication is that somehow matter is active rather than passive. In Prigoginian terms, all systems contain subsystems which are continually 'fluctuating' and at times a single fluctuation or combination of them may become so powerful, as a result of positive feedback, that it shatters the pre-existing organization. At this revolutionary moment – Prigogine calls it a 'singular moment' or a 'bifurcation' point – it is inherently impossible to determine in advance which direction change will take – whether the system will disintegrate into 'chaos' or leap to a new more differentiated higher level of 'order' or organization, which they call a 'dissipative structure'. According to Stengers and Prigogine it is the processes associated with randomness, openness that lead to higher levels of organization, such as dissipative structures. Chance indeed nudges what remains of the system down a new path of development and once that path is chosen (from among many) determinism takes over until the next bifurcation point is reached.

According to Alvin Toffler in his foreword to their book, "by offering rigorous ways of modelling qualitative change, Prigogine and Stengers, shed light on the concept of revolution. By explaining how successive instabilities give rise to transformatory change, they illuminate organization theory. They throw light also on certain psychological processes: for example 'innovation' which the authors see as associated with 'non-average' behaviour of the kind that arises under non-equilibrium conditions."

The "spontaneous self-organisation of non-equilibrium systems" which Prigogine and Stengers propose has some fascinating spin-offs. For example, at the moment that this spontaneous self-organisation occurs – say within a chemical reaction – the molecules seem to be able to communicate with each other directly to achieve a coherent, synchronized change. Locality fails. At this critical moment the individual constituent particles seem to innately comprehend their unique position-to-be within the larger but as-yet-unformed whole.

As we have seen, when there are pertubations or fluctuations in a non-equilibrium system close to chaos, at the bifurcation points, things are unpredictable – they can go either way. In hindsight the demise of the Soviet Union seems inevitable and it has been treated that way even I though before its collapse absolutely no-one predicted it. But from Prigogine we know that at the bifurcation point the outcome is impossible to predict. Things could have turned out completely differently: the Berlin Wall might still be standing, the crackdown on the Baltic States in January 1990 during the Gulf War might heve been successful and the August 1991 coup against Gorbachev not even staged since it would have been unnecessary. And 'Dvinsk' would still be 'Dvinsk' not 'Daugavpils'. Furthermore I doubt whether in the art world we would be talking about 'post-colonialism' and global art.

As we know from the Butterfly Effect, a chain of events can have a crisis point that magnifies small changes. I think the Korean Fluxus artist Nam June Paik must have recognised this when he wrote his article on President Landsbergis of Lithuania for Artforum in December 1990 before the critical events had occurred. Incidentally it is interesting to think of the Fluxus movement in global terms – spanning Asia, America and Europe but also in terms of Chaos Theory and Prigogine – since many of the Fluxus artists were very interested in processes

associated with randomness and openness. As Paik wrote: "The East European revolution produced a playwright-president, Vaclev Havel in Czechoslovakia, but few people know that it also produced a Fluxus-president: Vytautas Landsbergis, the president of Lithuania. During the spring of 1990, the image of this bespectacled and stoop-shouldered 'music professor' paraded across the TV news every day. He succesfully defied the blockade of Soviet Power and the 'benevolent' advice of the Western press to go slow lest he destroy the superpower summit. When Gorbachev received the Nobel Prize, Landsbergis sent him a congratulatory telegram: 'Your Majesty'."

This audacious David-and-Goliath situation strongly reminded Paik of Landsbergis' best friend, George Maciunas – the founder of the Fluxus movement. Landsbergis and Maciunas were both the sons of well-off architects and were best friends at school in Kaunas, Lithuania in the last peaceful days of prewar Europe. Landsbergis remained in Lithuania and Maciunas ended up in New York. Landsbergis, although still confined in Soviet Lithuania, evidently contributed musical compositions for a number of Fluxus concerts and participated several times in Fluxus mail-art events such as those organized by Meiko Shiomi from Osaka, Japan. As part of her 'Spatial Poem No.5', Meiko Shiomi proposed an 'Open Event': "Open something which is closed; Please describe to me how you did it and what happened by your performance. Your reports will be recorded on the world map." So we note on the world map in the area occupied by Lithuania, the name of Vytautas Landsbergis. And the following description: "A day after my return from the country to my flat in Vilnius, I opened the lid of my piano and hit the keyboard of F sharp. When the sound died down completely, I went to my study to continue on some unfinished work. Vilnius 1 pm July 23, 1972".

I would like to imagine that the so-called 'Baltic Way' on August 23, 1989 when 1 million Latvians, Lithuanians and Estanions joined hands in a continuous human chain across 680 km stretching from Tallinn, the Estonian capital, in the north-east through Latvia to Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, in the south-west was an event conceived in the Fluxus spirit. Was it the idea of an artist, a poet, an engineer or perhaps the idea of a president? This brave and defiant protest on the anniversary of the secret Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 which consigned the Baltic States to 50 years of illegal rule by the Soviet Union certainly made front page news all over the world. Could the 'Baltic Way' have been the crucial perturbation – the catalyst to the break-up of the Soviet Union?

I'm sure Maciunas would have thought that 'holding hands' was beautiful. Indeed he had his performers holding hands in New Marlborough, Massachusetts in 1977 (only a year before his death) when they performed his 'Untitled Marching Piece' at the Flux Snow Event. But I doubt that even he fully realised the power of Fluxus ideas or their imminent relevance to his former homeland. One million Balts 'holding hands' on the 23rd August 1989 and then a little over two years later, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia are independent states and the iron grip of the Soviet Union is broken, at least for the time being.

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