

# STATE OF THE UNION: AUTUMN 2020

'We are living in a mad mad world hold each other close, hold yourself close.'  
– Moor Mother

*Flatness is the stillness before making, potentiality, but also the point of exhaustion when your mind and body are in recovery, conserving energy.*

*Flatness is the baseline: the concreteness of form as it meets (dys)function, without the restrictions of language.*

*Flatness is the question of the archive set against an elapsing sense of self within capitalist realism. Decades of Tory ruin. Centuries of structural racism.*

In many ways, the ethos behind Flatness has completely evolved, from its beginnings in 2013 to now, so that its present iteration may even go to disavow some of my original motivations. The project began with a programme of artists' moving image works entitled 'Flatness: Cinema After the Internet', which I'd put together for a film festival in Germany. The Flatness website, which I set up from London later that same year, was a return to the internet from the cinema, examining subjective, historical and labour relationships flattened by the networked screen. The recorded history goes that 'the website was a way of continuing many of the discussions from the festival online.' By the current time of writing, however, I have found enough of a political context and voice to say: the experience of working with the long-reigning festival director was so alienating that setting up the site seemed like the only means of salvaging nine months of research, as well as my confidence and my damaged health.

At the time of the festival, the increasing power of social media was simultaneously spurring on protest movements in the Arab world and Black Lives Matter in the States, and diminishing democracy in the US and the UK through the targeted spread of misinformation ahead of 2016. Fuelled by this febrile energy, I was able to produce two updates, each generating new commissions, in quick succession with little funding. But I was running on empty: beyond enthusiasm and self-exploitation – an all-too-common combination for artists in post-financial crisis Britain – there was nothing to sustain the website, and soon it ran dry, fatally fulfilling the 'no future' capitalist realism it framed, with critiques by contributors including Mark Fisher, Pil & Galia Kollektiv and Jan Verwoert. An undesired, debilitating kind of flatness took hold.

Peers encouraged me to move on and I attempted to get 'proper jobs' at institutions from Tate to the Stedelijk. I now realise how much institutional racism was working against me in those hard-won interviews. The shame and stress I felt in my body in being gaslit by white supremacists (*you are never enough*), and in not being able to name this. I'm thankful now for the presence of the not/nowhere art workers'

cooperative, for turning around what it takes to be part of 'the club', and to join in this collective endeavour as a member of the board.

*Out of the blue the physiotherapist acknowledged the link between depression and back pain. They indicated it was an increasingly common combination of symptoms.*

Looking back now, the period held a more generative temporality than I could appreciate, unwell as I'd become. Leading up to elections in the UK, the US, Brazil, India, Egypt, Turkey and Poland, people were beginning to recognise the fascistic underpinnings of neoliberal politics in the way it exploits inequality for the profit of the few. On successive election nights, social media lit up with people pledging to look after one another in the face of the toxic bullies in power. More and alternative forms of collective organisation were required in resistance.

With my expanding consciousness, the cold, vertical form of curating for the white cube I knew was fading into irrelevance. The latter is a tooth-less kind of performance, which often uses the language of radical activism without any commitment to following through and challenging the status quo of colonial white-cis-hetero-ableist patriarchy. After a period of convalescence and feeling cared for, and to be able to care, again, I began to assert my positionality and interrogate what I wanted for and from the Flatness website. I won a small funding bid and wrote what could be described as a long blog post, setting out my stall.

*Processes of decentering power: disidentifying with racial capitalist time, its cultures of fear and ruthless accumulation.*

My target was the perniciousness of social media platforms whose business models reinscribe users' status within capitalism as products sold to both advertising companies and nefarious political conspirators. Although this continues to leave a bad taste, in retrospect I realise I was really speaking to the despair I felt that the promise of accessibility brought by art on the web was being drowned out by the all-encompassing appearance of sociality of Instagram. Not so much FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out), my experience was simply a familiar missing out.

Setting some necessary boundaries early on, Flatness learns through programming and celebrating younger artists like Adam Farah and Natasha Lall. Via a lexicon of carefully weighed neologisms, Farah describes themselves as 'anti-cloutist' and weaves accountability, sincerity and desire into their work. Lall makes meme collages as a kind of homage to the internet where, while coping with a chronic illness, she found solace among queer groups. With Lall's embeddedness in online communities and Farah's cited inspiration from defunct torrenting site Limewire, they recall, despite their generational difference, the internet pre-Web 2.0, which offered lifelines to transgressive identities in the form of mailing lists, message forums and blogs. I'm

glad a lot of this activity is now more known and public, but I sense the real work that is changing lives is still done under the radar.

*Remember, for the racialised, and the gender-queer, there's sanctuary in remaining partially understood.*

Moving towards a more collective mode of curating, which acknowledges the conditions of both artist and curator, Flatness has begun to manifest this activity through partially visible projects with Rehana Zaman and Lucy Clout, whose modes of working circumvent the pressure for production by calling instead for mutual support, the overdue unlearning of received knowledges, and resistance to forms of capture and extraction. I do not claim that the fees offered by the project (£800 including production) go further than a nominal remuneration of the artists' time. Yet Zaman and Clout's contributions invest in improving the conditions for making and imagining, strengthening support systems and redefine the terms of production. Those like us who work in the context of UK academia are reckoning with the casual terms of our contracts, once optimistically considered flexible for 'time in the studio', but now exposed as beyond precarious at every level of work – from the racialised bodies of cleaning to teaching staff.

'Sick Woman Theory insists that the body and mind are sensitive and reactive to regimes of oppression, particularly our current regime of neoliberal, white supremacist, imperial-capitalist, cisheteropatriarchy. It is that of our bodies and minds carry the historical trauma of this. That it is the world itself that is making and keeping us sick.'

– Johanna Hevda

*Find pleasure in dissolving sensitive selves from their relentless interpolation within this vacuum, in reclaiming the feeling of total fragmentation caused by code-switching and assimilation.*

While I was dealing with my illness a white upper-class curator organised a touring show of incredible politically Black art from the 1980s. My heart swelled to see these works out of storage, but I couldn't help but see the various systemic injustices at work today, reproducing the same circumstances Black and Brown artists and cultural practitioners found themselves in back in the eighties. If things are truly to change, offering a platform to suppressed voices would mean the permanent devolvement of power and equity to the most overlooked, and a genuine revision of the rules as to what can be voiced. Without this power for transformation, the arts are worth nothing.

*Fuck those who refuse to listen. Fuck those who listen with 'disinterested interest'.*

To dare to dream beyond the limitations on our lives as people of colour subdued

within unjust systems. With my Black and Brown womxn, trans, crip and working-class peers, I share rage at the commodification of our rage. I vow to abolish the obstacles designed to fail us more than anyone else. I am meanwhile working to dismantle the anti-Blackness that was part of my casteist upbringing, and to shake off the validation I sought from the rich white establishment, through working hard to make opportunities for Black artists to work with creative freedom. Your transcendence of normalcy transforms our expectations of transcendence through art (\*they find this scary and will diminish this statement).

'The knots and stories of our only being legible when held in relation to one another. To be a Brown feminist is to forge connectivity through chasms of difference.'  
– Aditi Jaganathan

I am ambivalent about legacy and archiving when the present system makes it so easy to dismiss, forget and erase: each day I learn from the writing of Black and Brown womxn whose tremendous legacies in the world of political organising are accompanied by a relative absence in the dominant narratives. Yet the curation of a durational space for art on the web over the course of several years now begins to feel significant, harnessing this ephemeral and devalued space to fill it with extraordinary forms of being in the world. Supplementing a heritage of diasporic resourcefulness. Curating in the margins as a way of practicing accountability when the news constantly tests our nerves.

The idea of flatness has always felt grounding for me, trusting the intuition in one's body when mustering strength against divisive forces. To quote Moten and Harney, who write about fugitivity as a mode of living together, which 'cannot be shared as a model but as an instance', spaces for desire and dreaming must be made and unmade every day to fortify against hate. My body overrode my efforts to work without love. I now dedicate my work to seizing the means of somatic recovery and encouraging a shamelessness around incapacity. To replacing a value system based on constant incentives to produce with an imperative to hold oneself, and each other, close.

- Shama Khanna

\* A note on the text: As the title suggests, I wrote this text in the weeks leading up to the US election. Thankfully, my angst has significantly dissipated since first sitting down to write.

## References & Cherished Companions

Aditi Jaganathan, 'Brown Feminist Connectivity (Re)mixed' and Taylor Le Melle's questions in *Tongues*, edited by Rehana Zaman, 2018.

'Sick Woman Theory', Johanna Hedva, 2015.

Open letters, posts and works by Evan Ifekoya, Jamila Prowse, Cairo Clarke, Jasleen Kaur, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley and Ifeanyi Awachie in 2020.

Rabz Lansiquot in conversation with Jemma Desai, 'This Work Isn't for Us: Part 3', LUX, 2020.

Shirley Anne Tate's lectures on YouTube.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, 2013.

Careful editorial advice from Hannah Satz.

Contributions to Flatness over the past seven years: <https://flatness.eu/>

not/nowhere cooperative: <https://not-nowhere.org/>

Dr Sylvia Theuri for inviting me to write this text for her exhibition 'Thirteen Ways of Looking' at Herbert Gallery, Oct-Dec 2020. Please also read her text 'The physical and the digital and the spaces in-between' written in response to this one.