Revisiting STS Across Borders: Interview with Aalok Khandekar and Kim Fortun, conducted by Duygu Kaşdoğan and Angela Okune

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Abstract

In the 2018 Sydney Conference of the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S), Aalok Khandekar and Kim Fortun curated a special exhibition "STS Across Borders" in line with the conference theme, "TRANSnational STS." In the 2019 New Orleans Conference of the society, the curators extended and deepened this first exhibition with the "Innovating STS" exhibition. Both exhibitions inspired and oriented new collaborative initiatives questioning, designing, and infrastructuring the transnational scope of STS. This is an abridged transcription of the interview conducted with Khandekar and Fortun, which accompanies the full unedited audio file also available in this text. The interview supplements the thematic collection "TRANSnationalizing STS: Places and Spaces" which built upon these exhibitions. In this interview, Khandekar and Fortun discuss the conceptualization, design processes, and insights gained from these two exhibitions.

Keywords

STS across borders; innovating STS; exhibit; interview; transnational STS; methodological nationalism

Audio

The unedited audio recording of this interview can be accessed at: https://n2t.net/ark:/81416/p40p48.

Introductions

ANGELA OKUNE. Hello, my name is Angela Okune and I'm a member of the Editorial Collective of *Engaging Science, Technology and Society* (*ESTS*). I'm here today, January 26, 2022, with my colleague Duygu Kaşdoğan to interview Aalok Khandekar and Kim Fortun, who were behind the organization of the *STS Across Borders* experimental special exhibition, organized for the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Society for the Social Studies of Science, or 4S, which was held in Sydney. The exhibition extended the theme of the 2018 meeting, which is "TRANSnational STS," and helped deepen and extend the transnational character of the society itself, while engaging issues invoked by the "trans" prefix: across, beyond, to change thoroughly, and by the problematic and evolving status of nations in the processes of global ordering. The following year, in 2019, at the annual meeting this time held in New Orleans, the project developed a second special exhibition, this time called "Innovating STS" to further the 2019 theme of *Innovations, Interruptions, Regenerations*.

Both exhibitions included both an in-person gallery exhibition, as well as a digital exhibition, that are still open and accessible to view at stsinfastructures.org. Aalok Khandekar led the organization of both special exhibits under the leadership of Kim Fortun, who was serving as 4S president at the time. So today, we're lucky to be with them to learn more about the conceptualization behind the exhibits and the processes necessary to organize them and bring them together. And so with that, I will turn to the first question. I'm curious how the idea for the project emerged, and what kind of organizational, technical and social infrastructure was necessary to execute it?

KIM FORTUN. Sure, and thank you for hosting this conversation. I think it's important to preserve the memory of projects like this. One of the impulses behind the project was awareness that scientific fields of all kinds are served well by preserving and reflecting on their own history. Many STS scholars have documented and analyzed those processes in other fields. I was coming into 4S in a new leadership role, I really reflected on this and questions about how STS as a field could preserve its history so that it could be reflected on and extended in new directions. Simultaneously, I was deepening my appreciation of the extraordinary transnational character of the field of STS. As an organization, its mission is to serve as a home and support for STS across regions. So that was part of our organizational commitment.

It's also clearly a strength of the field that we have deep communities of STS in many, many regions of the world that cohere internally, but also reach across many different kinds of boundaries. And so I was wanting to help build an archive or a memory infrastructure for us that from the start was transnational and reflected that transnational character. That was really the seed of it. And then with Aalok and others, we had to figure out what kind of project would actually carry that vision.

AALOK KHANDEKAR. Thanks, Angela. And thank you for hosting this conversation. It's really exciting to be reflecting back on the project. Just to say a little bit more about the nature of *STS Across Borders*, the actual format [it] took. It was staged both as a gallery exhibition at the conference venue, as well as a digital exhibition, which asked exhibitors to narrate STS formations from their own locations. These locations could be STS communities in the nation, within nation states, but they could also be STS networks that were trans-regional, or they could be particular departments documenting their own evolution. Part of what was needed

was supporting technical infrastructure. A group of us were already involved in designing and developing the Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography (PECE), which was by this time, ready to be expanded to support new kinds of projects than the ones that it was initially designed to do. We set up an instance of the PECE platform for ourselves, imagining that this would support *STS Across Borders*, but it would also potentially grow as an archive for the field of STS at large.

And what PECE does—and what *STS Across Borders* affords the ability to do—is to archive artifacts in multiple formats. They could be audio files, they could be video files, they could be images, they could be text objects—with a lot of attention to metadata, which allows these objects to be richly contextualized. Which then allows them to be drawn into potentially other conversations, with other kinds of artifacts, from other kinds of settings, in order to facilitate something of a comparative understanding—in this case, of how STS as a field begins to emerge differently in different places. So, *STS Across Borders* provides a deep archival capacity. It also has a layer of collaborative analysis built into the platform that allows people to query objects from different locations, primarily using the annotation tool on the platform. And it allows for newer forms of presentation—curated presentations using these artifacts in the form of what are called PECE essays, which are multimodal essays that can be composed on the platform by drawing in objects that are archived on the platform already. These could take different forms: multimodal essays, photo essays, timeline essays, and so on. Thus there are a variety of different formats available in terms of presentation as well.

So the experiment was in figuring out what kinds of genre forms we can pursue to narrate the history of the field. This was a process that was carried out over almost six months in the lead up to the conference. I believe there were close to about twenty contributions to the *STS Across Borders* exhibition, really from all across the world, which from the outset was a very collaborative process where people were beginning to collect objects and then look at them together in order to figure out what kind of form the eventual exhibit would take. And so this wasn't necessarily something that we had figured out ahead of time, but was itself an evolving process. At the same time, it was also important to represent this effort at the conference. So the other aspect of this project was a gallery exhibition that we was staged in the form of posters, which were "image heavy" in many ways. We were asking people to identify iconic images to represent their exhibits. We used ten standard questions that we had developed as part of a group and they could be something like: *what is the infrastructure that supported development of the STS formation?*, or they could be something like; *what are some of the foundational texts, concepts, discussions, orientations for STS in this particular formation*?

We then color-coded them so each question corresponded to a particular color, so visually you could make out what questions these particular posters were responding to. So on day one of the gallery installation, we organized these questions by the particular STS formation that they were representing. On the second day, we flipped it around to bring all posters that were reflecting on the same question together to take a broader, more holistic view of the different ways in which STS has evolved—different kinds of infrastructures, for example, that have sustained STS in different locations—which really impresses upon the viewer the very diverse conditions and ways in which STS has come about and taken shape in different locations.

KIM FORTUN. I'll add that one of the advantages of working this out digitally was that not only could we tolerate but encourage multiple formations. So for example, the exhibit on Japan was not about STS in Japan but about anthropological STS in Japan. So there was space for a lot of heterogeneity. And as Aalok said, some of the collections weren't codified around the nation as the core methodological unit. Further because the exhibitions didn't just include narration but also actual links to founding documents of departments, links to texts that had been particularly important in that STS community, etc., they didn't lock down one interpretation of what that STS formation was. A viewer could go into the collection and move through and experience it. Because it was digitally deep, it wasn't as driven by the "over voice," which so often overdetermines representations of difference. I continue to think that's a real strength of exhibits. If the ambition is to really draw out multiple genealogies of thought that have fed and continue to sustain and animate STS, having that depth been really important.

DUYGU KAŞDOĞAN. Thank you, Aalok and Kim. It is really great to listen to you again about these experiments. You have already mentioned about archiving, collaborating and transnationalizing as the contributions of these exhibitions. I wonder whether you can say a bit more about what have been the most important insights you gained within this experimental space?

KIM FORTUN. One [insight] that has really stayed with me is that, in many cases, the STS formation that was represented in the exhibit gained a new level of coherence through enacting itself as a formation. Recollecting the history of a formation kind of conjures it into existence. This really impressed upon me the way that by design, projects can create new socialities. Also, even before we got to Sydney, groups were in conversation across these formations. You could see it in a really embodied way in the exhibition hall where the exhibit about IstanbuLab was sitting alongside an exhibit about and from Chile sitting alongside a departmental or a program exhibit about Deakin University in Australia. So the way that *STS Across Borders* built lateral exchanges, was a really great strength. There's a lot of talk about the importance of new kinds of lateral relations in a decolonized academia. I think these projects actually accomplished that in a way that we, as Aalok said, didn't know was one of the key things we were after. But it was certainly a really rewarding, emergent effect.

AALOK KHANDEKAR. I'll maybe just emphasize something that I think Kim has already mentioned when she alluded to the design of the project and how it enabled new kinds of socialities. I think the other thing we came to really appreciate—and certainly is something that has carried over into our work, Duygu, Angela, as editors of *ESTS*—is the kinds of outcomes that we can envision and achieve by paying attention to the underlying infrastructure. So we came to recognize how it is in the design of the project itself where we begin to create possibilities for a transnational STS. And that infrastructuring can be very mundane in terms of figuring out, like, how to get posters printed in Australia, where none of us were physically located and didn't realize that it would typically take about a week to get those many posters printed. Or it could be about broader questions around how we facilitate the kind of exchanges that got animated by *STS Across Borders*. So, at one level, the exhibition impressed upon us just how much STS is already being practiced across different kinds of physical and social locations. And that there's just so much of it already there that doesn't get represented if you can conceive of STS in a very limited, narrow way. At another level, the exhibition

made us realize that to now draw out this richness and to really leverage that and let it remain vital, is a question of infrastructuring as much as it is a question about a lot of these other issues.

ANGELA OKUNE. I'm curious, the second time that you decided to go about running the exhibit genre again, did you intentionally do anything differently. And kind of wrapped into that, are there effects that you've seen as a result? You just shared so beautifully about the different STS formations that were able to find space at the table and were invited through these exhibits. I'm curious, have you seen ripple effects in unexpected ways or expected ways?

KIM FORTUN. I would start by saying that in the *STS Across Borders* project, it became clear as we moved through it that it not only was a representation of past work, but itself became a research project. And one of the questions was, *what does it look like to enact a critique of methodological nationalism?* While, of course, mindful that education research apparatuses around the world are largely tethered to produce by nation states. And it was at a time when we were on high alert for, you know, the cutting of research and educational funds in different national contexts. So we used the exhibit to continue to query the question of the nation in the production of knowledge. The other thing is that it became a real experiment in emergent forms of scholarly communication, responding to another of the project's questions: "*how do you communicate when you are trying to work outside of conventional methodological units, spatial scales, category schemes?*" Even the movement from digital to analog . . . which sounds simple . . . was not: moving from deep digital collections to a set of . . . twelve posters rendered in a structured way so that they could be made juxtapositional, for example. We learned a lot in translations, from digital to analog, and from complex to purposefully reductive move, I think we learned a lot about how much work we have to do to invent modes of scholarly communication that can carry the kinds of analyses that STS produces. So we went into the second year supporting *just* expanding interest and being part of the project, but also realizing that what we were doing was as much conceptual as practical . . . it was about memory . . . [and] opening up where the field could go in the future. And I'll say that the title "Innovating STS" was purposeful, and that innovation was one of the key themes of that conference. One reason for this was that innovation has been quite critiqued by STS scholars for being tied to naturalized notions of progress and the enlightenment, etc., yet innovation is a critical organizing device in many countries around the world, especially those trying to work out from under colonial structures. So putting innovation up for conceptual consideration and putting it in its place—asking, for instance what innovation calls *out* and drives *in* Ecuador, and how this is very different than in India— became really important. And we began to see that through juxtaposition and cross-project dialogue.

AALOK KHANDEKAR. It certainly was organizationally a little more straightforward the second time around than it was the first—when we were literally figuring out things along the way as we were imagining what the project was going to be. And so there was perhaps a little bit more organizational structure to the process the second time around. It was less tied to the nation state as a framing device than it was in the first instance. And so it opened up newer kind of possibilities for exhibits. I remember especially, for example, a set of really nice exhibits that focused on STS pedagogies—a focus that has been sustained and carried through as a key editorial priority for *ESTS*. One of the editors for *ESTS*, Emily York, was an exhibitor (and it was through the exhibit-building project that we got to know each other). And just to emphasize a point I alluded to earlier,

these exhibitions have produced a really fantastic set of collaborators that continue working on related issues to this day. Among other things, this is a major success of these exhibitions in my mind.

DUYGU KAŞDOĞAN. These are great responses and refresh our memories again with new insights. Each time I listen to stories from you, I learn new things. This is amazing. As you know, we are preparing this [thematic] collection where we try to understand the transnational scope of the field with the help of the analytics of "place and space." I wonder *whether and how do you think that place matters in doing transnational STS?* You already touched upon this question by bringing methodological nationalism to the table, for example . . . [and] the emphasis on locations during the preparation of the *STS Across Borders* [exhibition].

KIM FORTUN. I think I'll respond from my own methodological commitment to what I think of as scholarship attuned to the world . . . the kind of scholarship that needs to be done to address the conditions of a particular historical moment. That mindfulness needs to be directed locally—asking what calls for our attention, identifying destructive discursive formations that call for critical scholarly analysis. That happens locally, but it also happens across scale. Understanding the effects of structural adjustment on knowledge production in different settings, for example, is painfully local. But of course it's also a global process . . . mediated by nation states. So our capacity to do cross-scale analysis, I think is enabled by a project like this, and in turn helps us recognize the incredibly scalar and relational production of place. And this is almost impossible to do alone. Collaborative capacity really is critical to doing that kind of place characterization.

AALOK KHANDEKAR. I think maybe it is worth drawing attention here to another essay that all of us are working on right now, where we make use of this notion of "unmooring," to reimagine academia and how transnationalism and transnational practice becomes a resource for doing this, so even while other challenges are very, *very* locally specific, at least some of the strategies and some of the ways in which we address those specific kind of challenges can really benefit from the kind of collaborative capacities that I think projects like *STS Across Borders* are opening up.

KIM FORTUN. I'll add that I think Aalok addresses yet another double bind alongside that of the "nation": the way academia is currently organized and largely commercialized, where we're tied to commercial journals and universities and tethered to ranking systems that reproduce old hierarchies. So a project like this is both invested in academia and sustaining academia into its next generation, but also deeply critical of how academia is structured, and how it reproduces colonial order. [The] way around that is . . . not just in exposing it as a problem, but actually designing alternative spaces that reconfigure academia outside the bounds of the nation *in* and *on* open source technologies with open access commitments. . . . Figuring out what that looked like and how we could do it and sustain it is a kind of STS in the making . . . where you really are designing in the wake of what you understand as a scholar.

ANGELA OKUNE. Well, thank you both so much. I think that we've learned so much in remembering this experimental project that happened several years ago now, but I think [the project] continues to influence the way we engage with the platform and the work we continue to do. So thank you for your time.

DUYGU KAŞDOĞAN. Thank you very much. This has been a great conversation and it adds more to what we are here for . . . it's not just collaboration per se, but . . . learning—co-learning. There's no magical formula that can just solve these issues. Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts and I hope for listeners, it's also going to be inspiring for bringing new questions. Thank you for being here and sparing time today.

Biography

Aalok Khandekar is Assistant Professor of Anthropology/ Sociology at the Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad. His current research focuses on impacts and governance of extreme heat in cities of the global South. Khandekar serves as Editor-in-Chief of *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society (ESTS)* and was lead curator for *STS Across Borders* and *Innovation STS* exhibitions at the2018 and 2019 annual 4s meetings in Sydney and New Orleans.

Kim Fortun is a Professor in the University of California Irvine's Department of Anthropology. Her research and teaching focus on environmental injustice and disaster, data practices and politics, and experimental ethnographic methods and research design. Fortun's is the author of *Advocacy After Bhopal Environmentalism, Disaster, New World Orders.* Current projects include *The Asthma Files*, a collaborative project to understand the cultural dimensions of environmental health and the Platform for Experimental and Collaborative Ethnography (PECE), an open source/access digital platform for anthropological and historical research. From 2005–2010, Fortun co-edited the *Journal of Cultural Anthropology.* September 2017–2019, Fortun served as President of the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S).

Duygu Kaşdoğan is Assistant Professor of Urbanization and Environmental Problems in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at İzmir Katip Çelebi University, Turkey. She received her doctoral degree in the Science and Technology Studies Program at York University, Canada (2017). She was a research fellow in the Sociology Department at Koç University, Istanbul under the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) co-funded Brain Circulation Scheme fellowship programme in 2016–2017, and a visiting researcher in the Anthropology Department at MIT, Cambridge, MA, in 2013–2014. She is the founding member of *IstanbuLab* and *Transnational STS Network*, and served as council member in the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) in 2019–22. Kaşdoğan is an associate editor for *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* (*ESTS*) and her research focuses on democratization of science, transnational collaborations, political ecology of disasters, toxicity governance, and bioeconomies.

Angela Okune is the Director of Programs at *Code for Science and Society*, a nonprofit committed to advancing public interest technology. Angela studies and works on open knowledge infrastructures including sharing data, equity in open science, and open access publishing.