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Art History and the Global Challenge: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

The challenge of globalization and the “decolonization” of our way of thinking have become a major concern for most art historians. While it is still too early to assess the impact on the discipline of the “Global turn”—a turn that is all the more timid that it materializes more slowly in public collections and public opinions than in books—we nonetheless wanted to probe scholars who are paying close attention to the new practices in global art history. Coming from different cultural milieus and academic traditions, and belonging to different generations, they agreed to answer our questions, and to share with us their insights, questions, doubts, but also hopes for the discipline. This survey must be regarded as a dialogue in progress: other conversations will follow and will contribute to widening the range of critical perspectives on art history and the Global challenge.

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1. In your mind, is there today a global field of Art History? Since the publication of James Elkin's *Is Art history Global?* in 2006, art history has become more international, but has the discipline really opened to non-Western (non-North-Atlantic) contributions?

To the extent that the “historical” method—the very idea that art has a history, and that everything under the sun can be subsumed under such a history—is a Western idea, art history remains resiliently “Western” no matter where it is practiced or what it is applied to. And yet, perhaps the existence of a general, generally Western, universal called “art (history)” does not preclude its association, in different parts of the world, with a host of divergent research and writing practices that, even though they may exist as a subset of the more universal art history, also implicitly challenge that history and its methods. I take my cue here from Chakrabarty’s admirable book *Provincializing Europe*,¹ in which he claims that in an age where language can no longer hope to be universally transparent (much like art history can no longer be fully adequate to the many global art practices with which it attempts to grapple) there is nothing quite as insightful as the mistranslation, the approximation, the “workable truth.” In other words: in an age where all disciplines, including that of art history, have come under the radical suspicion that they cannot possibly adapt themselves successfully to what we have identified as our “global” condition, it would be all too easy to simply declare them invalid. It need not be so: much like Vladimir Nabokov’s translation of Pushkin’s famous poem *Eugene Onegin* presumes as axiomatic the necessary failure of any attempt to translate the work while at the same time producing a more than respectable approximation; so global art history, too, may well be at its most productive precisely where its own efforts of translation fail most resoundingly. Indeed, I have a suspicion that art history has globalized, or should we say: *diversified*

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 1st ed. (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2000). New Edition with a new preface by the author (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2007).

in many more ways than we, in our presumed (imaginary) centers of art historical power, may be aware of. South-South, North-North, and South-South-North etc. are happening. And it seems as if part of these conversations and initiatives (not unlike feminism, queer studies, etc. in cultural studies) is an effort to produce types of knowledge with which art history as we know it, and art historians, do not know how to deal. And in relation to objects and practices that can only with the greatest difficulty be accommodated by “classical” art history. And all these practices, marginal or not, whether they are happening in Karachi or in Cologne, may at long last fold back upon the discipline and change it as it were from within.

2. Would you say that there are platforms (conferences, journals, blogs, etc.) which play a more important role than others in the internationalization of Art History?

Instead of providing a list of publications—again, there are so many of them in so many different parts of the world, my list would only name the most obvious—allow me talk about one such publication with which I am familiar because I help edit it, *ARTMargins*. *ARTMargins* began as an online publication devoted to contemporary art in Eastern Europe. As such it had particular relevance for a very specific moment of globalization—the increasing inclusion of Eastern European voices in art historical discussions in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The former (communist) Eastern Europe represents the odd case of an “Other” that is, or was, also Western—a kind of “near Other”—with a rich and diverse history of challenging power centers and repressive regimes. As such, Eastern Europe and its art history are a showcase for the difficulties of translation a global art history must confront. For while there are many differences between art produced behind the Iron Curtain and its Western counterpart, different national cultures nevertheless remained to varying degrees connected with the West, and all of them shared

(unlike Russia) an intellectual history that is predominantly Western. *ARTMargins* set itself a goal that the eminent late Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski claimed was one of the most important goals for a more inclusive European (or global) art history that would not exclude Eastern Europe: a “horizontalizing” one. It’s a well-known fact that during the cold war, artists and art historians in countries such as Romania or Czechoslovakia knew a great deal more about what was going on in New York or London than in their neighboring countries. *ARTMargins* was founded as a way out of this “lateral blindness” by encouraging or enabling horizontal dialogues between these countries (rather than the “vertical” dialogue with New York or London) in a language they could all understand, English (it is not the case, in my mind, that the use of English is by definition hegemonial or colonizing). The print version of *ARTMargins*, which has been published since 2012, has sought to inject Eastern Europe into a global setting, and here, too, the goal is to produce such dialogue.²

3. What is, or could be, the role of the Internet and the digital in this globalization?

The internet has been one of the chief outlets for the neo-liberal fantasy of an unfettered, “global” flow of capital. If that accounts for the economic part of globalization—the part that, ultimately, also drives globalization in art (history)—, the internet may also have forced some changes in the way we think about images and who has the authority to interpret them. That authority used to be squarely vested in art historians. In recent decades, not least due to the way in which the number of images with which we are confronted wherever we go has increased so exponentially, this has changed. Art historians now find themselves in a crowded field where the authority to interpret images is claimed by many others, from historians of culture to visual studies and film scholars. As an ever-increasing amount of

fields and disciplines look to images for legitimacy, so art history as the natural place for their analysis and interpretation loses in significance. This may all be for the best as it forces art historians, if they want to remain competitive, to speak about (types of) images they know little about. This makes them amateurs, people with an only incomplete grasp of what they are doing, and that’s the best preparation for thinking globally.

4. What is the impetus for this globalization? Does it only rest on art historians’ willingness and political engagement? Or has the global approach also become a career strategy? Do the demands from our universities, which seek to attract more international students and incite us to publish internationally, have a real impact on research?

It might make sense to reserve the term “globalization” for the current global tendency sometimes identified as neo-liberal economics. Indeed, much of the global push in academia is driven by economics—from Louvre Abu Dhabi to the various branches of US private universities in the gulf and elsewhere—, and everything else follows in its wake. What is missing from this “flat” picture of globalization is, however, a sense of the history of the various globalisms that we can find in the 20th century, including ones that relied on (digital) networks, but whose political agenda was not informed purely by the capitalist imperative. I am thinking for instance of the 1970s and its efforts to establish community-driven networks for the exchange of knowledge and ideas. I do believe that globalization is having a real effect on academic life, and on the individual professional lives of scholars. This impact is, like neo-liberalism itself, not always easy to assess in its impact. For instance, the increasingly widespread open access policies adopted by many universities are, on the surface of things, among the more salutary effects of globalization. What could possibly be wrong with sharing your work on freely accessible online platforms, bypassing professional journals that cost money and that are, at any rate, part of the

² Editors: Sven Spieker, Karen Benezra, Francesca Dal Lago (Assoc.Ed.), Octavian Eșanu, Anthony Gardner, Angela Harutyunyan, and Andrew Weiner (Assoc.Ed.), *ARTMargins* (Chicago: MIT Press, founded in 2012). See <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/artm/current>.

establishment and its “power”? I remember two librarians at my university waxing lyrical about the fact that now that the university requires every faculty member to deposit every published or submitted paper in the institution’s own sharing platform everyone gets to share their scholarship with everyone else on the planet. Yet the fact of the matter is that such “global sharing” fits perfectly economic neo-liberalism’s bottom line, which is to cut cost wherever possible: as they discover that the same content may be available online, libraries may well decide that they no longer need to subscribe to the very (art historical) journals whose staff prepared those articles for publication, edited them in the first place. What is amazing is the degree to which globalization and its “sharing economy” manages to mask its own ideological nature, posing as a fight against “power,” the “disciplines”, and the establishment. It is, for the most part, nothing of the sort, and where it is, its true interests lie decidedly elsewhere.

5. Is Art History still dominated today by the “continental frame of art historical narratives,” so much so that the globalization of art history is in fact the hegemony of a Western way of thinking history, art, and the history of art, rather than a diversification of thinking paradigms? More generally, what do you think of the phrase “continental way of thinking”?

I assume this “manner” is historicism, the idea that for critical thinking to set in something has to be, or become, part of history. (This was I guess also the colonial project, and it seems as if all of colonial pedagogy has the same goal.) Apart from historical analysis, there is iconography as another basis for art historical inquiry. Both are unquestionably Western in origin, and I believe that James Elkins may be right when he says that art historical methods, despite their much greater spread across the planet, may not have changed all that much in the global age, and that art history, to the extent that it exists as such, is practiced the same way in China and in South Africa. I believe this is true, although such a broad characterization

may obviously contain within itself a host of very different practices. And it really only remains meaningful as long as we remain close to the list of “most written about” (Western) artists Elkins mentions in the same text. Once we expand the range of studied objects and practices to include non-Western ones, while the methods to study them may still be the same, they may turn out to be less than effective. This, to me, is the more interesting case.

Perhaps it would also make more sense to approach the question you ask as it were “in reverse.” It is characteristic that we always begin such questions with the “Western method”, the “Western way of thinking” etc., and then we ask whether or not what is being practiced “on the margins” corresponds to that “Western way”, or not. How about if we changed this perspective, beginning with the peripheral practices and then working ourselves towards “the center”? I bet the “Western way of thinking” would soon become more or less unrecognizable!

6 - Have we, as art historians, progressed in the ‘decolonization’ of our points of view (I am referring here to the ideas of Walter Mignolo and Boaventura de Sousa Santos)? To speak of “global Art History,” is it still germane to use frames of interpretation inherited from the reception of thinkers such as Bourdieu, Derrida, or Foucault, and that have been pervasive in postcolonial approaches since the 1980s, and the binary vulgate often derived from their writings. Should we, and can we, go beyond the models dominant/dominated, canon/margins, center/peripheries? In the history of global circulations of art, there have been many Souths and many Norths. Circulations are not as hierarchized and vertical as a quick and easy postcolonial approach could suggest (cf. the convincing positions of Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Michel Espagne). Working in the perspective of cultural transfers and geo-history, one sees very well that through their circulations, ideas

about art, and the receptions of artworks change greatly—the artworks also change, according to what Arjun Appadurai calls the ‘social life of object.’ A transfer from the North to the South can be used by the South in local strategies that will not necessarily benefit what comes from the North. Do you think one could adapt these ideas to Art History and its globalization? Do you notice, in your own scholarly, editorial, or critical work, a multiplicity of strategies and discourses from the local to the global?

I think it is obvious that the idea of an “instant” globalism without some reference to the local makes no sense. Indeed the very binary opposition of the two strikes me as problematic. I have recently been thinking a bit more about one of the already existing forms of global thinking, cosmopolitanism. Here we have a form of the global that, at least the way it was originally conceived, begins with the local and then moves out to some form of the globality, yet without ever losing sight of its local beginnings. Indeed this one of the original meanings of what the Greeks called a *kosmopolité*, a “cosmopolitan” citizen of the world. For the Stoic philosopher Hierocles’ whose idea was that as individuals we consist of series of circles, beginning with the human mind, the immediate family, extended family, the local community, neighboring towns, country, and human race. Our task, according to Hierocles was to draw these circles in towards the center—ourselves—, transferring people to our inner circles, making all human beings part of our concern. We can, I believe qualify the process of transfer to which Hierocles model as a form of translation. Hierocles’ idea of translation as an effort to assimilate an interlocking series of rings or circles of which we ourselves are a part has the advantage of reminding us that translation refers to something broader than the mere transposition of words: it is a laborious process of negotiating cultural difference that does, as such, not eradicate that difference. The German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz once wrote that “our translations

[German ones], even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English.”³ For Pannwitz the translator “must broaden and deepen his own language with the foreign one.” Translation, then, is not simply a way of assimilating what is foreign; more to the point, perhaps, is the fact that as the various circles overlap with our own, we partake of an element of foreignness even when or where we feel most at home. For Hierocles’ circles separate as much as they link and connect, precluding precisely the kind of linearism, or literalism, that globalization appears to promote.

³ Rudolf Pannwitz, *Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur* (1917), cited from Kitzbichler Josefina/Lubitz, Katja Lubitz/Mindt, Nina. *Theorie der Übersetzung antiker Literatur in Deutschland seit 1800* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 294.