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By Whose Rules? Contemporary Art and Geography of Art Historic Significance

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the situation of 'contemporary art' in today's post-totalitarian China in order to highlight the drawbacks of the narrative approach to art history that assumes cultural coherence and temporal synchronization. The analytical frame of reference is not a narrative of art's development but the specific local (and national) conditions of its production, reception and consumption, including the relationship between China and the Eastern Bloc, which cannot be ignored in any discussion of Chinese modern and contemporary art.

Résumé

Cet article examine la situation de « l'art contemporain » dans la Chine post-totalitaire actuelle, soulignant les inconvénients de l'approche narrative de l'histoire de l'art qui suppose cohérence culturelle et synchronisation temporelle. Le cadre d'analyse utilisé n'est pas celui d'une narration du développement de l'art chinois mais les conditions locales (et nationales) spécifiques de sa production, réception et consommation, tenant compte de la relation entre la Chine et le bloc soviétique qui ne peut être ignorée dans une étude sur l'art moderne et contemporain chinois.

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Art history, as an academic and museological discipline, has been involved since the early 20th century in the discourse on and management of contemporary art. It comes as no surprise that art historians write about contemporary art and that they perform key functions within the contemporary art world. What is far less obvious is the extent to which art historic understanding of contemporary art affects how different art forms either achieve visibility and prominence within the global art circuits or are relegated to the relative obscurity of the local or regional art scenes. In order to address this tangled relationship, one must examine the assumptions that underpin art historic understanding of global contemporary art. I will do so in this essay by looking at two different geographic locations at two distinct, though I would argue related, moments: Central Europe at the fin de siècle and China today. My main objective is to suggest that our current way of defining contemporary art, which can be traced to the decades framing the end of the 19th century, makes it virtually impossible for us to grapple with the complexity of art types coexisting today within the Chinese art system.¹²⁵ Instead of examining this system as a heterogeneous field of cultural production that is not necessarily coterminous with our own, we, that is art historians, critics, and curators based within the so-called West, seek forms that are most compatible with our understanding of what contemporary art ought to be. Consequently, we tend to find what we are looking for – art that speaks with a local dialect but plays by the global rules defined not in China, but abroad through transnational art exhibitions, publications and markets.¹²⁶ I would further argue that if we are to arrive at a historic understanding not just of contemporary Chinese art but of the current Chinese art system – which includes contemporary art along with other art forms that cannot be classified under this rubric – we have to look for alternative ways of thinking about today's

art and, I would argue, for alternatives way of approaching art history.

From an art historic perspective, contemporary art – a label that designates only certain forms of art produced today – is believed to represent the current phase in an ongoing history of art. It is art that is perceived to be 'historically significant,' art that has a potential to last, and that is likely to occupy a key position within the art historic narrative, not yet written though certainly began, of the art at the turn of the millennium. This understanding of contemporary art assumes something else – its relationship to art of the immediate and intermediate past – what we used to call the postmodern and the modern. In other words, today's contemporary art, no matter where it is produced, no matter what are its geographic references and situation, belongs to a particular tradition of art making that began a bit more than one hundred years ago.

I would like to suggest that this tradition has a very specific point of origin. Even though contemporary art today may be produced, exhibited, and discussed across six continents, its genealogy can be traced to only one, Europe, or to be even more specific to Europe at a particular point in time, the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the 20th century. During this relatively brief period spanning roughly from the mid-1880s through the beginning of the First World War, self-professed followers and advocates of modernism declared that the only art that mattered was modern because it was the only art that embodies the unique quality of the present. It was the only form of art that was of its own time, that was in tune with time in a special way, therefore was quite literally 'con-temporary.' Consequently, it was the only form of art that had relevance for the future art history that would be written about the present.

I will use the example of the Vienna Secession, an artist group that in many ways was typical of the modernist exhibition societies active in Europe at the fin de siècle, to deal with the earlier moment. The Secession's motto inscribed above the

¹²⁵ For the discussion of the emergence of this system at the turn of the 19th century, see Anna Brzyski, "Art, Kitsch, and Art History," in *Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice*, edited by Monica Kjellman-Chapin (New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 1-18.

¹²⁶ See for instance David Clarke's critique of the Western attitudes towards Asian Art in "Contemporary Asian Art and the West," in *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, edited by Jonathan Harris (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 245-252.

entrance of its exhibition building (Fig.1), a venue that began showcasing international modern European art in 1898, unapologetically proclaimed this principle. It read: “Der Zeit Ihre Kunst, Der Kunst Ihre Freiheit / To the Age its Art, to Art its Freedom.” Of course, the age was the modern age and so ‘its art’ had to be modern as well. There simply was no other options given the logic of this temporal claim, which assumed, without explicitly stating so, that each age or period was fundamentally different and therefore required fundamentally different forms of art.



Fig.1

Façade of the Vienna Secession Exhibition Hall, designed by Joseph Maria Olbrich in 1897, completed in 1898, Vienna, Austria.
 Photograph Griffindor, June 2006.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Secession_Vienna_June_2006_007.jpg

This was the logic of art history, a discipline committed to a historic understanding of art, a discipline, which in 1898 was already assuming its role as a metadiscourse governing the production, understanding, and evaluation of art produced not only in the past but also in the present.¹²⁷ Because of art history’s Hegalian foundations, art historically significant art had to reflect on some level the *Zeitgeist* of the moment of its production. Although the artists of the Vienna Secession may not have had a particularly coherent idea of what that mean in practice, they were certainly

interested in proclaiming to anyone walking past their building that modern art, art of the modern age, was to be found in their remarkable exhibition hall. But, that was not all. They also wanted to suggest, that this type of uniquely important art was not to be found elsewhere, in particular not at the Künstlerhaus, a venue operated by the Austrian Artists’ Society (Gesellschaft bildender Künstler Österreichs), from which the members of the Vienna Secession (Vereinigung Bildender Künstler Österreichs) withdrew in 1897 to set up their own, alternative organization dedicated to promotion of international modern art.

The second part of the motto deserves our attention as well, since it has direct implications for the rest of my argument. It enshrines the notion of artistic freedom as the core principle of the Secession and, by implication, of modernism. The Secession motto suggests that modern art, the art of the modern age, must be free. This statement clearly has an ethical dimension. Since the Enlightenment freedom has been identified not just as an artistic, but also and above all as a human right. The pursuit of freedom was unambiguously a worthy cause and so those who sought it, were automatically on the right side of the ethical equation. In the motto, freedom is equated with modernity, modernity with freedom, and both are identified through the imperative form as the Secession’s goals.

This combative invocation of the notion of freedom suggests that there are certain constraints on modern art practice that prevent artists from creating the kind of art they want to make. In other words, one argues that there must be freedom only when there is a reason to argue for freedom, only when one feels inherently un-free. At the fine de siècle, modern artists certainly felt that the academic conventions of art making, held them back and prevented them from competing on equal terms with artists who at this time were still running the European art system – who were teaching art in the art academies, judging important shows, garnering the lion’s share of public attention, and selling most works. This was

¹²⁷ See Anna Brzyski, “The Problem of Modernism: Art Practice under the Gaze of Art History,” in *Modernism and Central and East European Art & Culture, Osaka University, the 21st Century COE Program Research Activities 2004-2006*, vol. 7 (January 2007): 339-365; and “Making Art in the Age of Art History, or How to Become a Canonical Artist,” in *Partisan Canons* (Durham: Dyke University Press, 2007), 245-266.

a common complaint though Europe. The modern artist's freedom was therefore not freedom to make art, since no one was preventing anyone from making whatever artworks one might have wished to make, but a freedom to exhibit art and therefore to be taken seriously. Not surprisingly, in the case of the artists who founded the Vienna Secession, their decision to establish an exhibition society and to erect an impressive venue dedicated to showcasing modern European art was entirely consistent with their goal to achieve this freedom – to be able to show whatever art they wished within the walls of their own exhibition hall and by extension to be free and able to shape the art discourse to their own advantage.

Of course this modernist idea of artistic freedom was highly circumscribed. It extended only to modern art. In other words, an artist who considered himself a modernist was free to pursue any form of modern art, but was not supposed to make art that was not modern. To do so was simply not acceptable since modern increasingly designated not only a particular type of art – an option for art making among many different, equally valid options – but the only art that claimed historic validity. This was certainly true for modernist artists and critics throughout Europe who fought rhetorical battles in the name of 'true' art (their art) and against pseudo or sham art (a term used by Whistler in his "Ten O'Clock" Lecture). By the 1920s, those proponents of modernism would use another terms to debase works and artists who were not part of the modern movement; they would derided them as 'kitsch'.¹²⁸ While true or modern art was the only significant art of the present, pseudo art or kitsch was not just bad; it was not art. As a result, by the interwar period, within modernist art discourse, that also included modernist art history, history of art culminated in modern art. All other forms of art making – forms that were not modern – were related either to the realm of primitive or folk production or consigned to the dustbin of kitsch. By the 1930s, the 'not modern art' of the present

simply ceased to exist as an object of concern for art historians, including those who worked in the newly formed museums of dedicated to contemporary art, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York or Museum of Art in Lodz.

This detour into the modern is intended to shed a light on the way in which contemporary art functions today. I would like to suggest that despite obvious differences between art practice and art discourse around the year 1900 and around the year 2000, those two moments belong to the same art system, one governed by the logic of art history, that assumes art to be a temporal phenomenon – to be of its own time – whatever that may mean. The main different between those two moments is that at the fin de siècle that understanding was just beginning to impact the European art system. The modern artists were therefore still struggling to identify themselves as the bearers of the historic torch. They did so by using the language of quality. By and large, they won that struggle by the end of the interwar period. By the year 2000, this historic understanding of art made in the present and immediate past has come to completely governed how art is taught, understood, discussed and evaluated throughout the so-called advanced world. Significantly, in the year 2000 China did not yet belong to that world. And even today, as China's economic power has dramatically altered its status, the Chinese cultural field, in particular the field of art practice, has not yet been fully integrated into the global system of art. Consequently, the rules that govern artworlds in the advanced art economies, do not necessarily apply in China, which should be understood as an emerging art economy.

Because of the lingering, though seldom acknowledged, legacy of modernism, which distinguished unambiguously between those artists and works that were modern and participated in historic development of art and those that were not and therefore did not, the term 'contemporary art' designates a very narrow spectrum of art produced today worldwide. It is

¹²⁸ Brzyski, "Art, Kitsch and Art History," 2-6.

applied to art historically significant art – artists, works, and forms of art practice that not only engage current paradigms of art making but also are perceived by those who work on contemporary art (as curators, critics, art historians, or art market professionals) to be contemporary – in other words, uniquely in sync with today’s world and with the current state of the art field.

This understanding of contemporary art assumes a certain geographic hierarchy, even as art history and broader art discourse celebrate the notion of global diversity and local uniqueness of art forms. This hierarchy is based on an implicit assumption that there is a single end point for the history of art or rather that local art histories can be woven together into a narrative that terminates everywhere in contemporary art. Terry Smith’s recent discussion of contemporary art as art of contemporaneity, a concept which acknowledges the impact of geography on the perception of time, postulates, in effect, the existence of different art-time zones – different geographic temporalities or ways of being in time, which are configured by unique local conditions and histories – all of which, nevertheless, give rise to contemporary art that is recognizable as contemporary.¹²⁹ It is this global contemporary art that fills exhibitions and museums, is featured on the pages of art magazines and books, is sold in auctions that are now taking place through the world, and becomes a point of discussion at innumerable conferences.

The case of Chinese contemporary art highlights in a particularly vivid way the drawbacks of this approach to art history. I would argue that exclusive focus on the contemporary art creates a fundamentally flawed impression of the situation of art in China today. The first thing anyone who has visited China within the last five years comes to understand, is that it is much easier to experience Chinese contemporary art as a coherent phenomenon in New York or London, than in

Beijing or Shanghai. It is not that contemporary art is suppressed in China though certainly there are certain contemporary Chinese artists, who have run afoul of the law. Rather, it becomes very quickly apparent, that what is recognize and celebrate as Chinese contemporary art in the West constitutes a very small percentage of what is taught, exhibited, discussed, and bought and sold as art in China. For example, the famous Beijing art district 798 is crammed with galleries only some of which show Western-style contemporary art. The majority sells works that it would be difficult to describe this way. Some of them may belong to traditional forms of art that are still practiced and taught at all major art schools. Others belong to a spectrum of stylistic approaches that can be traced to the post-1948 influence of Socialist Realism imported from the Eastern Bloc, in particular the Soviet Union, into China in the post-war period. There is also plenty of purely commercial work and a great deal of repetition.



Fig.2

Plaster cast study hall, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing China, 2008. Photograph by Anna Bryzki.

This diversity is mirrored at the level of art education. I would argue that in fact, it can be traced to this source. A student who wants to enroll at a Chinese art academy must already possess academic drawing skills similar to those

¹²⁹ See Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) and *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2011).

required of art students in the 19th century (Fig.2). This is a direct legacy of art instruction that championed realism as ideologically appropriate form of art. While the economic landscape in China has certainly changed in dramatic ways, creating a vibrant market for art that does not require such skills, the art instruction has remained committed to their acquisition and development. The Chinese art students must also take courses in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy as well as Chinese art history, which when taught in China does not necessarily lead to Western-style Chinese contemporary art. In other words, there is an alternative ending to the story of art in China. Finally, while Western-style contemporary art is certainly taught under the designation 'experimental art,' it is by no means the focus of art instruction. Moreover, its status is regularly debated within the art circles. Serious journals and art professional have questioned its identity as an authentically Chinese art form.¹³⁰ Needless to say, much of that discussion is colored by nationalism. And interestingly, much of it echoes similar discussion, which took place in Central Europe at the fin de siècle when modern art had to be defended against the charge of being a 'foreign' import.¹³¹

The situation in China today is dramatically different from the situation in Central Europe at the fin de siècle because contemporary art is a dominant form of global art practice. Moreover, Chinese government, if not necessarily the Chinese art establishment, is keenly aware of the need to play the global game. Given much of the current rhetoric – after all, China is planning to open an unprecedented number of major Contemporary Art Museums within the next few years – and the pull of the global art market, which rewards young artists who work in this vain, it is likely that contemporary art will thrive in China for the foreseeable future. It is also likely, however, that it will coexist with other art forms that cannot be

classified as contemporary. To treat them merely as interesting phenomena of contemporary Chinese visual culture seems inadequate. And yet, they cannot be incorporated into classical art history because of its deeply ingrained assumptions and biases.

What is the solution to this problem? I would argue that we need a different approach to art history, one that is systemic rather than narrative. This approach requires a different way of thinking about geographic relationships and vectors of 'influence' and reference. It does not presume temporal continuity or geographic unity of art, but rather recognizes a desire for such narrative coherence as a product of the European fine art system that emerged in the late 18th century and began spread globally in the early 20th. In fact, this approach does not presume a priori the existence of 'art' (or contemporary art) as such, but rather approaches it as a culturally specific concept that may produce a variety of different outcomes depending on the dynamics of the local, regional, and global situation at particular moments in time. It is therefore synchronically and diachronically dynamic. This approach to art history deals relationally with the full spectrum of art practices, art discourses (including the discourse of art history), art institutions, and art markets. It incorporates and acknowledges the possibility of imperfect knowledge, misinterpretation, dissonance, asymmetry, and the role of individual and collective self-interest and prejudice. Although art history written from this perspective may be significantly less heroic and coherent, and therefore not as compatible with the current art system, it could become more historically honest, less ideologically based, and, perhaps, better suited to function as a truly global discourse on local, also national, cultures implicated within transnational and global networks of institutional, cultural, and economic interactions.

¹³⁰ This topic was raised within special issue on Chinese Contemporary Art Criticism of the journal *Tsinghua Arts* (Tsinghua University Press), vol. 7 (June 2008), edited by Du Dakai and has been a regular topic of art discussions since.

¹³¹ See Anna Brzyski, "Foreign or Native: Perception and Reception of Impressionism in Polish Art Criticism, 1876-1893," *Centropa* 8, no. 1 (January 2008): 67-85.