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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?

I think there is a field of global art history, but only if we reconceptualize the notion of the global and recalibrate the registers of the discipline of art history. Such an effort to reconceptualize and recalibrate is not motivated by the project of inclusion or extension; it rather acknowledges the limits of the current norm and tries to begin elsewhere or be attentive to a different range of materials to constitute both the global and the art historical. It is a deconstructive and a foundational maneuver: to initiate post-colonial critique and to transcend the critique so that a different theoretical cosmos comes into being. So it's not just a matter of opening up to the non-western. It rethinks the western and how supposedly the non-western has constituted it and in fact should feel entitled to its own promise of emancipation, in its capacity to renew itself.

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?

I can mention *Third Text* as an important platform. The recent endeavors of Clark Institute and Getty Research Institute have been significant in this regard.

In the west, the work of Hans Belting in terms of writing art history, curating contemporary exhibitions, and developing links across continents has been crucial. And I am sure that the processes of weaving the narratives of art in various ecologies of art making contribute to this field of art history even if they are not collected under its auspices.

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

I think it is critical in opening up networks and facilitating the dissemination of knowledge. It becomes part of a new archive of the art historical or the material life of the current world.

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?

This anxiety for global art history conditions a different subjectivity, a different art historical agent who does research and circulates knowledge. In other words, a different subject is formed, speaking a language and interacting with other people in different conditions of intersubjectivity. How this subject mediates universities or curricula is contingent on the subjectivity.

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"?

Unfortunately, it is still dominated by the canon. This can only mean that the efforts to expand are not enough and are only productive at a certain level. There should be more collaborations between colleagues and disciplines to produce a more idiosyncratic narrative of sensible life and not only art as we know it.

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?

The binaries are important at a certain phase or level of analysis. But they have to be rethought in the process. In responding to this question, I might have to invoke Brecht’s notion of refunctioning. In a context of combined and uneven modes of production, it is necessary I think to re-possess whatever device that can be transformed and make things happen in very unlikely places. Moreover, a new theoretical vernacular should also emerge, one that is honed in the post-colonial crucible, taking liberties with English and at the same time risking the untranslatability of certain lexicons.

7. 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?

Yes, it is a question of latitude and coordinates. How does one map out the global? How does one connect? How does one weave into matrices of relations? These are the questions.

8. To conclude, what you see as the most important challenges facing the international field of Art History today?

It is method. The procedure of sensing material and worlding it with urgency and sympathy.