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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?

Before answering, I would also like to make some general remarks on what I understand the process of the 'globalization' of Art History to mean. I believe we all agree that the meaning that is currently attached to the notions of 'global' and 'globalization' does not imply a standardization or homogenization process, but rather the opposite. 'Globalization' therefore involves the awareness that the devices, spaces, subjects, and objects that constitute the disciplinary framework of Art History, and of art culture in general, are diverse and heterogeneous, and that they all co-exist in a connected space and in continuous circulation.

Taking this premise into account, from my point of view, the globalization process of Art History is based on three dimensions:

a) Acknowledging the global dimension of our object of study, in other words, the multi-vocal and multi-centered character of the processes of artistic production and visual practices. This involves incorporating the concepts of 'circulation,' 'connection,' and 'network,' as well as the transcultural and transnational perspective as an essential part of the new epistemic order. It replaces the idea of fixed boundaries with dynamic and moving areas of contact and friction.

b) Acknowledging the globally diverse and heterogeneous nature of the Art History systems of thought, logics of knowledge, forms of representation, interpretive models and types of discourses, which exceed the core canonically established by the history of Western art. This entails problematizing the methodologies and categories used so far, as a reasonable doubt arises about their suitability for 'thinking' about artistic practices generated in non-Western contexts. It also means, of course, that there is a need to redefine fundamental concepts rooted in Western

cultural and intellectual traditions, such as the notion of 'art practice,' 'work of art,' and 'vision-image.' These are reformulation processes that include the discipline of Art History in itself, as the Western construction that it is.

c) Feeling part of a global community, that is, participating in international discussions and conversations, establishing dialogues with contexts of production of artistic thought beyond our immediate scholarly environment.

The global turn is thus a paradigm shift; that is, it involves a change in attitude and thinking. This is not only intended to broaden the scope to include other realities, but also to change the way we think about these realities—including the 'Western' ones—and redefine our position in the world, our relationship with others, in an increasingly expanded scenario.

With these considerations in mind, I will now answer the questions.

When analyzing the current situation, it should be generally concluded that Art History is no longer confined to the North-West territory. Certain institutions and research groups have undoubtedly shown an increased interest in artists and works produced outside the traditional Western creation centers. Increased research and studies focusing on the processes of artistic and cultural transformation and circulation also speak of this movement towards the global, or at least, towards the transnational. But how is this expansion actually materialized, and what are its associated problems?

1. First, it would be interesting to establish a comparative-quantitative study to analyze how many publications, theses, and research studies are centered around these issues; and how many of them take non-Western objects and subjects as a research focus, compared to the volume represented by the 'traditional' studies, or those focused on the standard canon. This analysis, which is beyond the scope of this interview, would help to measure what the degree of 'real' opening is, and how it varies depending on different

national contexts.

2. Second, a dysfunction can still be seen between the expansion of the corpus into new objects, practices and spaces, combined with the maintenance of the narratives and categories generated by Western thought to explain these newly incorporated realities. Attempts to 'reinvent' the narrative schemes used so far—such as the experiment conducted by David Summers in *Real Spaces* (2003),¹ to cite one of the best-known examples—are still a rarity. I believe that we have not yet taken the step in a radical way. We recognize the existence of other possible ways of addressing historical and artistic processes, but have not incorporated them into our explanations when delving into the complexity of these phenomena. We remain installed in the use of knowledge from the perspective of Western logic. However, one of the critical issues of interest arises here: as Westerners, is it possible to become estranged from ourselves and to re-position ourselves within other logics? If we take into consideration this actual difficulty—or even, impossibility—the process of globalization may lie in becoming aware that our viewpoint is inevitably situated and located; therefore, it is always partial, and it should deal with the fact that there are always other possibilities on the horizon, other potentialities.

The discipline of Art History is not an exception to this estrangement, as it is confronted by a kind of paradox. Given that it is constructed on the basis of categories and languages generated in the North-West world, does not imply the reformulation of these categories an undermining of its constituent pillars to re-formulate the discipline from its own foundations?

3. Third, what happens when, instead of speaking of artistic creations and cultural manifestations, we discuss theoretical and historiographical contributions? It should be recognized that the incorporation of 'non-Western' historical-artistic 'literature' and historiography is still in a minority.

This can be easily verified by examining the references used to support research; or the state of the art section in many studies, in which references to non-Western studies are still scarce. The search for a 'decentralized' Western gaze on artistic practices and productions, which is one of the constituent objectives of the global turn, should not only expand the scope of the 'object.' It is necessary to incorporate the theoretical, critical and historiographic productions generated in these 'other' contexts, exploring how they propose alternative models that can reconfigure our own way of analyzing Western cultural realities.

The fundamental difference between the global turn of our contemporaneity and the other globalization processes that came before it, is that it does not only involve including or analyzing 'objects' that do not belong to the Western tradition, but cohabiting and living with 'subjects' constituted in other orders and/or systems. The critical point of the globalization (or the global turn) of our times is not to 'expand' or 'integrate' (which remains a colonial point of view) but to 'cohabit' and live together.

This creates important responsibilities for contemporary art historians. The responsibility to know more about other contexts, other places; to expand the corpus of readings and intellectual references; to experiment with narrative genres; and to re-work our meta-discipline. From my point of view, this attitude of searching, learning and continuous experimentation is one of the essential factors that make up the condition of 'real openness.'

4. Fourth, national differences need to be taken into account, with their particular intellectual traditions, academic systems and research cultures. There is therefore no 'global' answer to this question, but one tempered by the local conditions of each context; it could be said that 'a' global Art History cannot be identified, but rather multiple ways of understanding, realizing and developing Art History from a global perspective. I

¹ David Summers, *Real Spaces. World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003).

agree with Elkins (2007)² that both national, and cultural and territorial identity have sometimes been the explicit impetus for the above. This can be seen in Spain, for example, where there is more of an inclination to establish relationships with Latin America, for obvious historical, cultural, and language reasons.

These national differences can also be seen in the existence of various barriers and limitations. The Spanish university system is a good example, as it is rooted in a civil service administrative system based on compliance with a series of 'bureaucratized merits' in line with the national system itself. This has proven to be ineffective in bringing in scholars and experts of other nationalities, who could contribute to providing more diverse points of view.

5. Fifth, the organization of curricula should also be examined, an area where important national differences also exist. Returning to the Spanish university system, which is the one I know best, subjects outside the parameters of 'Western' art are rarely found, and in some undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs they are even non-existent. This is totally understandable: it is very difficult for a university system whose workforce is made up of 98% Spanish faculty to develop a curriculum from a truly global perspective. In some cases, this openness is based on a partial understanding of what the global turn means, or on the need to endow traditional curricula with a veneer of 'intellectual mainstream.' This is illustrated, for example, by the existence of a single subject called 'Art of non-Western cultures' out of a total of forty that have nothing to do with non-Western perspectives. All this does is reinforce the West/ Not-West dichotomy, which is exactly what the global turn seeks to overcome. The global, if we understand it as a paradigm shift, cannot be a 'topic' within a subject. The global must be a cross-cutting approach.

² James Elkins, *Is Art History Global?* (New York; London: Routledge, 2007).

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?

Without a doubt, those platforms that have a greater capacity to summon art historians from various nationalities and with different perspectives are called upon to play an essential role in the internationalization process of Art History. However, I believe that this global explosion that has characterized the development of contemporary art in recent decades, with the proliferation of multiple phenomena and events—biennials, transnational policies of museums, tourist flows, market expansion, etc.—, has not yet taken place in our academic field of Art History. Again, in order to measure the true scope of this internationalization process, we should analyze how many transnational networks and research groups exist today; what the annual percentage of 'international' contributions in conferences and events is; and, above all, the nationalities of these international participants.

Nevertheless, from my point of view, the crucial problem in this question lies in the very concept of 'internationalization.' First, a distinction should be made between internationalization and globalization. They are related concepts, but the existence of one does not necessarily imply the existence of the other. No one doubts that a network of research groups from different European nationalities working cooperatively on joint projects contributes to the internationalization of Art History; but whether this favors the shift to a global Art History depends on other factors beyond the transnational character of the network.

Second, while at least in Europe, internationalization has become one of the basic trends in universities' strategic plans, and a requirement for academic 'survival,' I think we have not thought enough about what it means 'to be international' in our contemporary world. This affects the third dimension to which I referred earlier; that is, what being part of a global community is, and what it involves.

Here lies one of the great dilemmas facing Art History in its process of globalization: there are unresolved frictions between the international and the local. It is true that to participate in the 'international discussion' it is necessary to share common points: certain methodologies, frameworks of thought and issues, in addition to using a common language understandable by everyone. But at the same time, the global turn must be based on the recognition and preservation of diversity and difference. The critical point, therefore, is in overcoming the internal contradictions that are part of the globalization process itself. For example, as academics we are required to speak an international language in the broad sense of the term, but, at the same time, the 'topics' of these international debates impel us to deepen our differences and identities. I wonder how consistent it is, for example, to propose the analysis and appreciation of critical traditions carried out in other languages while still using English as the prevalent vehicle of communication.

In fact, the language issue is one of the fundamental problems of this internationalization process. Numerous questions arise in this regard, although two of them can serve as an example: how to preserve the linguistic identity of each community—with all that language entails in terms of ways of thinking and understanding the world—meanwhile we contribute to the consolidation of English as the *lingua franca*, 'the' international language of scientific and academic knowledge? How to ensure equal participation of non-English speakers in the global debate, considering that there is a natural difficulty to express complex thoughts when speaking in a language other than our mother tongue?

But there are more questions: for example, how to bring policies, strategies, and research lines imposed by supranational organizations (which supposedly have a general or global interest) into line with local problems and interests (which are not always coinciding with general ones)? Obviously, finding answers to these questions is not easy, but this does not relieve us of the

responsibility of exploring possible solutions.

Third, it must be borne in mind that what we mean by internationalization differs greatly depending on the context in which we place ourselves. So, if critically addressing the idea of internationalization is necessary in our contemporaneity, the need becomes even more pressing when we are in a South-West context, which is the one from which I write; a context that is part of the Western tradition but one that has not been part of the hegemonic-dominant axis for centuries.

In many cases, internationalization is assumed here to be a process of assimilation to other academic areas, mainly English-speaking and northern European, which are recognized as having some sort of epistemic, theoretical, intellectual and methodological 'superiority.' In this sense, then, we must not forget that the search for self-legitimization is one of the factors underlying certain internationalization practices, which to a certain extent subverts the non-hierarchical nature that the global turn supposedly involves.

Of course, the internationalization process entails appropriating trends and tools from other countries. I mentioned this earlier when I referred to the need to be in a continuous process of intellectual and methodological searching, learning and transformation. But this appropriation should be accompanied by a reformulation based on local interests or individual agendas. Is that really what is happening in the field of Art History or, conversely, are we witnessing an importing of ideas, ways of thinking, and methodologies that we apply uncritically?

As indicated above, internationalization is not found in being 'like' others, but in resolving the question of how we can all live together and respect our differences, by bringing together our similarities.

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

Not only do they play an important role, but it can be said that the internet and digital media have had a constitutive role in the development of the global turn. In fact, this cannot be understood without digital media providing access to globally distributed sources of information and resources, which have allowed the investigation and discovery of cultural realities hitherto unknown or only marginally considered. It is also clear that telecommunications have brought the contexts of academic work and production closer, and broken down the barriers caused by geographical distance.

But while the internet and digital media are presented as a promise of an open, democratic, and global future, with a theoretically unlimited access to documents, images and data distributed around the world, the other side of the coin is that this digital ecosystem can also become the setting for new cultural, epistemic, and academic peripheries and marginalities.

Logically, the nations that have the greatest cultural and scientific/academic digital—or digitalized—heritage available and accessible on the internet, will be able to play a more prevalent role in terms of exercising an epistemic influence. At the same time, it would be their cultural realities that would be the subject of study and research. Currently, for example, it is much easier to study the history of European engraving through the open publication of data from collections such as those in the British Museum and the Rijksmuseum, than the history of Latin American engraving.

Access to information is also far from being equal and uniform across the board. Important differences exist which are related to the economic resources of each country. It must not be forgotten that a large number of repositories and databases control access to, and use of, their resources through licenses and subscriptions, the cost of which cannot always be assumed by all countries

and academic institutions. Researchers are on an unequal footing depending on their local context of work, and sometimes more limited opportunities are available to them to develop an Art History from a global perspective, and/or to be part of an international community. Although the approach to Art History from a global perspective is a theoretically attractive ideal (and even one that is ethical and committed to cultural diversity), the material conditions that make these studies possible, which require funding, access to information and data, should be taken into account. It is therefore necessary to move towards an accessible, distributed and unrestricted ecosystem of data and open shared resources.

Under this question, I think it is necessary to pay special attention to the computational analysis of large data sets, one of the defining characteristics of the knowledge society in which we live, and that is transforming the paradigm of cultural studies. These macroscopic studies use complex algorithms to process thousands of pieces of data related to art and visual culture, distributed geographically and over extended periods of time, and allow us to materially address the art world to an extent hitherto unknown. These new analytical methodologies contribute to the questioning of traditional narratives based on national, geopolitical, and stylistic categories that have been used so far in the process of the systematization of Art History. In other words, correlations between the data that the algorithms and statistical indices operate on, are independent from the key taxonomies that have shaped the epistemology of Art History since its beginnings. Naturally, these algorithms—and their results—are still cultural constructions in which certain assumptions and conventions are embedded, therefore they should also be subject to critical discourse from the perspective of the global turn.

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?

I think it is a combination of each and every one of the reasons suggested in the question. Undoubtedly, the idea of a global Art History emerged in the heat of the transformations in contemporary society, where, as I indicated, the digital factor played a crucial role. The idea of a global Art History would clearly not have been either possible without the awakening of a critical awareness of the fallacy of the totalitarian character of Western narratives which postmodern thought promoted during the last decades of the last century. Without doubt, there is an intellectual concern and social momentum that seeks to overcome the limitations imposed by the geopolitical divisions of modernity. But we cannot rule out that there are also economic, academic, and ideological interests underlying the promotion of global studies. Given the current state of affairs, I believe that it is very difficult to disentangle all these motivations.

I think one of the impacts of the 'demand' to publish internationally imposed by universities is seen in the need to 'select' *ad hoc* topics of research that are internationally relevant, and so interesting for an audience (readers and reviewers) that in most cases is disconnected from the local issues of the context in which research is written and carried out. This 'international' way of thinking can be very positive, because it allows us to refocus the study of the local from a broader perspective, examining the factors that connect the local with other contexts with a wider scope. However, there may be a perverse side to this, leading to the rejection of local issues, as they are considered not to be 'subjects' with an international scope when, in fact, the international dimension of research does not lie so much in the

subject—or the object—but in the focus.

Meanwhile, if we change the preposition of the question, 'a real impact of research,' another interesting issue arises: how can the quality and importance of the impact of research be assessed? Again we find here the friction between the local and the international. A study can have a strong impact in international terms, but none from a local perspective, because it does not address any of its specific issues and interests. Similarly, a study may have no international impact, and still be essential from the local point of view. I am not referring here to research being recognized by the 'locals,' but to it actually being able to bring about a transformative process in a given territory.

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”?

Please refer to the answers to questions 1 and 6.

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?

Of course; the binary and antithetical approach is a simplification emanating from a dichotomous view of the world ('I and the others'), which perpetuates this dividing line. Assuming the

complexity of cultural phenomena, in their irreducible difference and diversity, involves developing a new vocabulary removed from binary categories.

This is why, in my view, the theoretical framework proposed by Bruno Latour in his extended Actor-Network Theory, including its recent reformulations (2013),³ represents a more suitable context for thought to 'interpret' and understand the hyper-connected world in which we live, composed as it is of multiple networks of associations. In this sense, I think the metaphors of 'network' and 'constellation,' which draw a distributed framework of nodes and associations in our imaginary, are more efficient thought instruments than antinomian categories, and allow us to conceptually overcome the center-periphery model.

In any case, problematizing this terminology is important in itself, as it reveals an awareness of the need to develop a different meta-language. Provided that this awareness exists, I think using these terms as tools for critical discussion is not too problematic.

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

³ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

globalization? Do you notice, in your own scholarly, editorial, or critical work, a multiplicity of strategies and discourses from the local to the global?

As I mentioned in section 6, it is necessary to overcome the old dichotomies on which we have built much of Art History thought from its beginnings, and here the local-global dichotomy should also be included, as it conforms to a binary and antithetical model.

In fact, as Latour says, what we call 'global' is nothing more than a set of many local interconnected contexts. From this perspective, Paris is no more global than a province of southern France. It is a question of analyzing connections and mediation processes, that is, the transformations that operate when heterogeneous actors are interconnected. These transformations occur in multiple directions through processes that affect all actors involved.

I think this framework of thought, which focuses on mediation and transformation processes rather than on the 'positions' or 'places' where actors are located, is a good tool to surmount the conceptual limitations that are also attached to the local-global dichotomy. This changes the focus of attention: instead of investigating the nature of contexts as determinants (where we stand), what should be investigated is the nature of relationships and/or connections, as these connections and their dynamics of change have the ability to draw different 'landscapes,' even though the actors (and their places) are theoretically the same.

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

The possible existence of a global Art History is one of the crucial aspects that our discipline must face in the present and the immediate future, that is, how to live together in a scenario of constant flux, in a continuous process of renegotiating our

inalienable differences to find common ground, similarities. Actually, this is merely an extrapolation of one of the major challenges in today's world to our little academic microcosm.

Many of the urgent lines of action and critical reflection that I think need to be addressed in this regard are indicated in the preceding paragraphs. However, to conclude and answer this final question, I would like to pose another question: Is the Western world driven towards the global, as the result from the need to settle a score with other territorial and cultural contexts after centuries of neglect, ignorance and subordination? And if the global is a framework of thought created by Western culture to meet its own drives and needs, could the global turn become a new instrument of Westernization?