

2017

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### Recommended Citation

Barreiro López, Paula. "Art History and the Global Challenge: A Critical Perspective." *Artl@s Bulletin* 6, no. 1 (2017): Article 8.

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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?**

The global turn is without doubt related to the progressive introduction of non-Western productions into the art historical discourse, academia, museums and art institutions. Regarding 20th Century art, at the beginning of the 2000s Kobena Mercer and David Craven,<sup>1</sup> to name but two examples, had already started examining plural modernisms, an approach that is still perceptible in today's historiography, research projects and subjects as well as new academic programmes. This introduction was also possible thanks to (and in some cases encouraged by) exhibitions that took on a global approach and gave non-Western productions a central position. This was the case, for example, of *Global Conceptualisms* (Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999) and more recently *Modernités Plurielles* (Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 2013), *After Year Zero: Geographies of Collaboration* (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin and Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, 2015), and *Postwar Art. Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic* (Haus der Kunst, 2016-2017).

However, putting the introduction of these productions into practice is complex and often uneven and problematic. Though many art history research and study programmes as well as institutional policies have opened up to non-Western productions, the fact that these policies and new approaches are part of the economic globalisation process should also be highlighted. The globalisation of art history is directly connected to advanced capitalism and the interests of a market that is always on the look-out for new spaces for expansion (a specific example of these direct relationships is the increasing

interest for Latin-American art displayed by the curatorial and academic fields following its economical revaluation by the private collector market).

Rather than simply acknowledging the presence of non-Western productions, I think it is important to ask how, why, and in what conditions they are given space in today's art world and art history. On the one hand, there is an international/global field of art history, but this field only exists in a limited sense, meaning that it involves only a few authors, institutions and agents, who tend to build a restricted community. Regarding art history research and the international academic community for example, even if international conferences and publications try to include new subjects and new geographical zones (international art has become an increasingly common subject in calls for papers in the past few years), they end up including them through the voices of researchers that work in Western academic institutions (especially North America and Europe), or in other regions of the globe that are able to establish a dialogue in English—the language of global capitalism—and that have the financial means as well as the institutional (and political) support necessary for travelling. The voices of local researchers always remain at a disadvantage. Their writings, studies and conferences circulate exclusively on local or national levels, and translations are rare.

Moreover, although it is undeniable that a community of non-Western artists and their productions has been integrated to the market and the institution, this introduction still feels uncomfortable. Even if non-Western productions are included in academic and curatorial programmes, often with the best of intentions (or not), the exploitation of exoticism and Otherness are brought forward in order to lay emphasis on their specificities (by exaggerating local characteristics as opposed to the supposed universality of the West, by favouring artists that actually use codification systems that are easily comprehensible in the West). This does not

<sup>1</sup> See for example David Craven, "The Latin American Origins of Alternative Modernism", in Rasheed Araeen, Sean Cubitt and Ziauddin Sardar (eds.), *The Third Text Reader: On Art, Culture and Theory* (London, New York: Continuum, 2002), 24–34; Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

contribute to deconstructing hegemonic structures. On the contrary, it deepens them. Moreover, when one tries to level out artistic productions from different places within historiographical global approaches, one can easily get stuck in a formalist interpretation that neglects contexts and social forces.

## **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?**

Some institutions and programmes have indeed done an important job in creating spaces for different voices and perspectives from outside the hegemonic discourse to come together (for instance editorial platforms and websites like *Third Text*, *Afterall*, *E-flux* and *Hyperallergic*). However, it does seem to me as though a great part of the efforts that have been put into creating these international spaces for dialogue is still currently based on the work and ambitions of art historians and cultural workers that are centred on research projects and meeting spaces that unfold within their respective institutions. International conferences, organised through international calls for papers on specific subjects, as well as seminars which frequently invite foreign scholars, have helped create other, more horizontal and democratic spaces for sharing and debating art history. A greater number of researchers have been able to access them. For example, and referring to the period that I am concerned with as a researcher (the second half of the 20th Century), over the last few years, the [ARTL@S](#) programme in Paris, the [Former West](#) project in Utrecht, the transatlantic network of [Conceptualismos del Sur](#) and the [Modernidad\(es\) Descentralizad\(s\)/\(Mode\(s\)\)](#) in Barcelona, have created spaces for debate with open calls for papers. Moreover, these projects have also centred on offering rich online material and content for an even wider community.

Of course, many of these projects are based in

universities, but museums and contemporary art centres are also becoming more important. For instance [Former West](#) is based at Bak (basis voor actuele kunst) and the [L'Internationale](#) project brings several European art centres together as a network. The Haus der Kunst in Munich or the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid have recently organised ambitious conferences that have gathered researchers from many areas of the world, in order to debate post-war art and the Cold War. These two institutions have adopted clear editorial lines and have both published on these questions. Furthermore, the role of art history portals and networks like [Art-Hist](#) are extremely significant, precisely in order to widely distribute these calls for papers, as they help disseminate and circulate the information on an international level.

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

Our globalised societies are characterised, among other things, by the multiplication of information, exchanges, and the circulation of capital, persons and values which shape complex economic, cultural, political and digital networks. Digital technologies are part of the contemporary experience of reality, they play an undeniable role in the research, broadcasting and exchange of information for art history today. These past years, the open access to online publication, directories and archives, along with the exchange of information between researchers, through platforms such as academia.edu, research.gate and university platforms with online publications, has deeply impacted the research processes and the possibilities for information circulation. The digital revolution has had a crucial impact on the access to primary and secondary sources. Digital technologies, in this sense, have transformed the position of art historians, as they can more easily access corpuses of information, which has certainly contributed to opening new lines of research, transnational approaches and a redistribution of study subjects. Information

portals such as [Art-Hist](#), which help rapidly circulate calls for papers, has greatly helped researchers come together in universities and institutions around the world. These portals have helped set up networks for international collaboration (though as stressed above, this “global” circulation is limited within the academic world: these calls only reach a restricted, and mostly English-speaking, community). There is still much work to do in order to build communities of art historians and cultural workers that are really united beyond their origins and affiliations.

Apart from being central in broadcasting, circulating and making research available, as well as creating platforms for debate, digital technologies are becoming key tools for knowledge production. On the one hand, despite its limitations, the internet is opening possibilities for important collective work and exchange in the development of networked research, thanks to the creation of new writing and collective publishing systems that have only just started being explored, and that I believe we should increasingly take advantage of in the future. On the other hand, digital technologies allow the quantitative, geospatial and conceptual use of data, through different tools such as Geographic System Information (GIS), network analysis platforms such as Cytoscape and data capture and digital publishing devices such as Omeka, or multiple platforms, such as Palladio. In my opinion, they are important tools to visualise and analyse producers, complex networks and the circulation of artists, concepts, works and objects. In recent years, several projects (such as [ARTL@S](#) and [iArtHis Lab](#)) have developed the use of quantitative methods and digital visualisation to produce a complex explanation of artistic productions through a historical and geographical approach. These approaches involve the implementation of new tools, the enhancement of work methodologies, the widening of ways of thinking through the connection of art history to other areas of study (computer science,

mathematics and geography) and a visual presentation of the research's conclusions.

Even if this kind of dialogue is a challenge for art historians (still trained according to a traditional approach of the discipline), I believe the digital world can offer significant tools to renew methods and produce multi-faceted, collective, interdisciplinary and shared analyses. Anna Brzyski's thoughts on the potential of considering art history as a “synchronic and diachronic cartography system”<sup>2</sup> rather than a narrative; along with the exploration of the possibilities of cartography as a multi-layered visual and conceptual alternative to a linear concept of history thus seem particularly interesting to me. Since 2015, as part of the [MoDe\(s\)](#) project that I have been directing at the University of Barcelona, we have been trying to introduce a quantitative approach to our speculative methods, by using geographic information systems. The challenge for us is to configure a new cartography of artistic practices, such as counter-cultural movements during the Cold War and their networks, exchanges and interactions. This is why the goals of [MoDe\(s\)](#) are in keeping with the perspectives of “geohumanities,” as they are particularly attentive to artistic movements, exchanges and migrations between different areas over a given period.

Of course, the use of digital tools doubtlessly implies a number of pitfalls whose importance should not be neglected: the risk of transforming these geographic tools into authoritarian systems of classification, for instance, or producing new categories of exclusion and inclusion.<sup>3</sup> As Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel has stated: “Maps lie”, and they should not make us consider the knowledge they produce as objective and true.<sup>4</sup> Rather, they should be treated as a malleable work material to be contextualised and completed (or contrasted) by other types of information.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Anna Brzyski (ed.), *Partisan Canons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma. Geography's Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, “Introduction: Do Maps Lie?,” *Art@s Bulletin* Vol. 2, no. 2 (2013): Article 1. <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol2/iss2/1/>

<sup>5</sup> A theoretical analysis of these questions started emerging at the IV International Meeting for Digital Art History Researchers in Málaga (Espagne), 15-16 December 2016, with a contribution by myself and Juliane Debeusscher. To watch the presentation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0R4mcUmGNLo&t=4s>.

**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?**

The reasons for this are multiple and even contradictory. Gradually, and especially since the critical investigations of “new art history” and postcolonial approaches, transforming our methods and our interpretations has been understood at once as a necessary and urgent task by many researchers who are convinced of the importance of defying hegemonic narratives and opening the field of examination. Even though this evolution is slow and halting, it is an ongoing process in artistic institutions and art biennials, through many art history programmes (including new classes on non-Western art) and seminal books (like those by Jonathan Harris, Terry Smith and Okwui Enwezor).<sup>6</sup> There is definitely a political implication in these choices. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos wrote, “World justice is narrowly connected to cognitive justice.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, critically revisiting our immediate history, while remaining aware of the political value of the praxis of history, has become an urgent task in order to positively contribute to the society we live in.

But added to these reasons, there are also global forces that encourage the market's expansion and the exploration of new fields, new artistic productions and new spaces. These forces are behind the interests and the marketing strategies of Western institutions that are relocating (museums as well as universities, especially English-speaking ones, that are looking for new audiences and students). In order to attract students (especially international, but also local students, who are offered differentiated fees) and

increase the input of economic resources, global studies programmes are multiplying in academic institutions, which are, more than ever, reduced to seeking private capital in order to survive.

In the field of research, international mobility grants are part of the necessities of a young researcher's career. Their significance depends on the country, as it is connected to the work market's consolidation systems. The Spanish government, for instance, strongly supports an international mobility policy for researchers (doctoral and post-doctoral), by research grants and programmes that explicitly make internationality a necessary strategy to find a job once they return to Spain. Research programmes for excellence such as Ramón y Cajal (from the Spanish government) or Icrea (from the Generalitat de Catalunya) require between two and four years experience abroad in order to be an eligible candidate. The necessity of contributing to the growing international publishing industry (primarily English-speaking “impact” journals, that are assessed along quantitative criteria by companies like Thomson Reuters) is also one of the requirements, which, according to Spanish rating agencies, define international research.

The changes in readings and interpretation come up against the necessities of internationalisation for survival. However, they converge towards a progressive internationalisation of subjects and publications, which obviously has an impact on the internationalisation of research, as well as on the subjects that are (being) developed. Just like choosing a place of publication, these are strongly influenced by the interests of the funding sources that support them (and that are often held by private corporations). This situation is particularly serious for humanities that are given dwindling support by the public and private research systems responsible for their funding.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Harris, *Globalization and Contemporary Art* (London: Blackwell, 2011); Terry Smith, *What is contemporary art?* (Chicago: The University Chicago Press, 2009); Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel and Ulrich Wilmes, *Postwar Art. Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic* (Munich-London-New York: Prestel, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Interview of Boaventura De Sousa Santos. Online: <http://www.telediariodigital.net/2012/05/comienza-el-encuentro-universidad-movimientos-sociales-y-nuevos-horizontes-del-pensamiento-critico/>

**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”?**

Western domination, imperialism and West-centred interpretive frameworks are indeed part of the DNA of art history, which was created as such at the time of the configuration of national empires and colonial powers. Boaventura De Sousa Santos, for example, as other authors of the Modernity/Coloniality Project (such as Walter Dignolo and Ramon Grosfoguel) has clearly shown how coloniality<sup>8</sup> built a system of thought that is reproduced in our disciplines, of which art history is a clear example. The structures of colonial, Western, imperialist thought that have persisted up until now are part of our disciplinary and sociopolitical structures. A “diversification of thought patterns” in art history (as in globalisation itself) is still a distant horizon.

However, we should not be too quick in rejecting as inefficient the efforts made by art historians and other professionals to move towards greater diversity. The critical and deconstruction processes of hegemonic canons, the introduction of new theoretical frameworks and the creation of a dialogue between art history and other disciplines and methodologies, all try to open up to artistic productions, narratives and critical corpuses that up until now/then had been silenced, in non-Western spaces as in the “peripheral” West.

Likewise, researcher mobility has contributed to decentering places of hegemonic enunciation, giving more visibility to research groups and

<sup>8</sup> Ramon Grosfoguel defines coloniality as “the continuum of forms of domination and exploitation after the disappearance of colonial administration, produced by the hegemonic structures and capitalist/modern patriarchal/colonial world-systems.” (“la continuité des formes de domination et d’exploitation après la disparition des administrations coloniales produites par les structures et les cultures hégémoniques du système-monde capitaliste / patriarcal moderne / colonial”) (Ramon Grosfoguel: “Les implications des altérités épistémiques dans la redefinition du capitalisme global. Transmodernité, pensée frontalière et colonialité globale,” *Multitudes*, 3/2006 (no. 26) : 51-74 <http://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2006-3-page-51.htm>; accessed 10 January 2017).

intellectuals from outside the United States and Europe. Latin America, for instance, has sparked renewed interest on the part of researchers, with projects such as [Connecting Art Histories](#), [Conceptualismos del Sur](#) or the now finished project Meeting Margins: Transnational Art in Europe & Latin America 1950-1978. Even if it is still Western academia that defines and ranks, the interest shown for productions that up until now were considered as “marginal” has allowed several art historians to work on these productions (and to find fundings to help develop their research). Often, this interest has even helped researchers from geographic spaces considered as peripheral to introduce their interpretations, readings, methodologies and even theoretical corpus to the Western academic sphere without their contributions being labelled as “Western ways of thinking”.

The expression “Western way of thinking” conveys an essentialist, homogeneous and simplified view, that cancels out the specificities of every discipline (like artistic productions and critical debates) in their local contexts and in their tensions with the global context. Often, this expression is used with a very limited knowledge of local contexts where hegemonic corpuses were not always the same, and where the vernacular and the resistance were always integrated as an important part of historical construction. This is very real, I believe, for art historians like me that come from institutions situated outside of the hegemonic centres of Europe. Piotr Piotrowski made this point clear when he questioned the concept of Eurocentrism. In doing so, he was criticising the implicit homogenisation of Europe in this conceptual construct, and he rightfully took into account the strength of peripheral spaces and their specificities (such as Eastern Europe, but one could also mention Spain of the second half of the 20th Century).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, “Du tournant spatial ou une histoire horizontale de l’art,” in Quiros, Kantuta et Aliocha Imhoff (eds.), *Géo-esthétique* (Paris: Editions b42, 2015), 123-131.

**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 spatial turn produced by the studies of globalisation and postcolonial critique obviously had a strong impact on the re-interpreting and analysis of artistic productions, art criticism corpuses and silenced narratives. This is visible in museum projects and in the interests of recent art history research. However, as I already mentioned in my previous answer, established Western conceptions of art still influence and shape the study of art, as they still influence the theorisation and validation processes of artistic practices around the world. This is strongly connected to the persistence of a colonial epistemology in our own disciplines, thought structures, and sociopolitical spaces. A critical reassessment of disciplines and perspectives on art and culture must rely on a collective effort based on various tools, such as the theories of Bourdieu, Derrida and Foucault, connected to other positions and thoughts (Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, Édouard Glissant, Silvia Federici) and other methodological frames (feminism, gender studies, postcoloniality, decoloniality) that offer a powerful and essential critical arsenal in order to decolonise our gaze. The critical significance of these authors from the 1980s and 90s is doubtlessly still useful and necessary today, but we should always take into account the cultural and epistemological frame in which they were developed. The legacy and knowledge these critical corpuses offer should always be read in the light of the cultural system

which produced them and that shaped their perception of reality.

Bringing a complex perspective to the bipolar constants that divide and simplify the world is part of my personal study interests and the [MoDe\(s\)](#) project I direct in Barcelona. My work precisely centres on the study of exchanges and relations that often question dual conceptions, through the analysis of non-aligned positions and contact zones established by artists, critics and political and social movements on both sides of the Atlantic, and inspired by anti-imperialist movements. This research takes place within the frame of the collective work done by [MoDe\(s\)](#), where we try to reconsider and problematise the duality between the two blocs during the Cold War, by reconstructing exchange and collaboration networks, spaces of permeability, whilst also studying other world configuration models from this historical period. Starting with the concept of “decentralised modernitie(s)” that help examine different configurations of artistic modernisms in the transatlantic axis, we aim at studying the artistic and political practices from the viewpoint of local contexts, by emphasising cultural transfers across national, cultural and ideological boundaries. As Piotr Potrowski made clear for the case of Eastern Europe, just like in other contexts, the distinction between centre and periphery, and even the perception of the centre, are stronger in historiography than they were in the artists' own perception. In fact, we should speak of centres and peripheries, using the plural. This was, to a large extent, the interest of the international conference and doctoral seminar [Cold Atlantic. Cultural War. Dissident Artistic Practices, Networks and Contact Zones at the Time of the Iron Curtain](#) that we organised in September 2016 at the Reina Sofia Museum and the University of Barcelona. Starting with the destabilisation of the status quo with the Bandung conference in 1955 and the Hungarian revolution in 1956, two events which encouraged a transnational approach, we lay bare the collaboration and contact networks between different zones that were developed by artists,

critics, curators and institutions linked to or inspired by the Non-Aligned Movement. Many discussions centred on the ways in which these alternative constellations contributed to developing a transatlantic and transcontinental culture, in order to assess to what extent all these intricate factors helped overturn and question the bipolar geographies of the Cold War.

However, if oppositional relationships (that make up a large part of Western thought) tend to neglect spaces of meeting and hybridisation (hence reinforcing discriminatory historical constructions), I do not think we can eradicate them completely from art history and analysis systems. Bipolar confrontations between dominants and subordinates have been and still are part of the historical (and current), cultural, artistic and identity experience of various social knots (because of their nationality, their beliefs, their gender, their sexual orientation or their place of birth). These contrapositions have been strongly reinforced historically. It seems to me these binary poles (that are historically real and factual) should rather be studied for their own complex reality, by showing the power of modes of resistance and hybridisation, as well as the systems and policies that create models of exclusion that power structures have clearly favoured and reinforced in order to create divisions. It is crucial to demonstrate the complexity of these discrimination systems, that often dovetail other discriminations, as the feminist movement, for instance, quickly realised. This situation was masterfully denounced, for example, in Victoria Santa Cruz's piece "Me griraton negra" ("They shouted black at me," 1970) where the colonial discrimination system is added to gender discrimination. This seems particularly important, at a time when we are witnessing the damage done by triumphant transnational capitalism, the fracture of projects which had previously shaped the configuration of post-war Europe, and the gradual closing-up of Europe and the United States. Preventing free movement divides human beings between those

who are welcome and those who must stay behind closed borders. They are a poignant manifestation of these processes of exclusion that are still alive and radically topical.

To make these policies visible and to analyse their implicit motives, precisely in order to move beyond them, were among the great contributions of feminist, postcolonial and decolonial approaches. The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, for instance, proposes the concept of "ecology of knowledges," that goes beyond the "abyssal thinking of Western conceptions of modernity."<sup>10</sup> Ecological thinking is understood as a counter-epistemology, that recognises the plurality of heterogeneous thinking (and knowledge), and emphasises dynamic interconnections with each other. Faced with a monocultural conception of knowledge that is strongly rooted in the First World, the "ecology of knowledges" understands knowledge as an "intervention in reality", rather than as the superiority of Western knowledge over other means and forms of knowledge. Thus the concept of an "ecology of knowledges" aims at questioning and starting to replace the dominant epistemological frames that continue reproducing the power structures that have ruled over Western thinking since the Renaissance.<sup>11</sup> I believe Sousa Santos's "ecology of knowledges" is also a useful concept for contesting this point of view from within art history, because it can operate for recognising the plurality of knowledges and their sociopolitical agency in international modern and contemporary art.

**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**

<sup>10</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Beyond abyssal thinking. From global lines to ecology of knowledges," *Eurozine*, 2007, 66 (Available online : <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-06-29-santos-en.html>).

<sup>11</sup> Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

**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?**

North-South relationships are not exclusively geographical. There are in fact several Souths and several Norths within the North, just as within the urban space of the cities we live in. When De Sousa Santos speaks of an epistemology of the South, for instance, he is not only referring to a geographical South, but to a South that brings together the exclusion zones that I mentioned earlier. However, the radical differences in the conditions of existence between the North and the South should not be neglected.

It seems to me that it is mainly thanks to postcolonial and decolonial approaches that more complex geographical outlooks have been developed, though they are obviously not the only theoretical frameworks reinforcing this viewpoint. Current debates about the necessity of reassessing methodological tools in the study of global art state the importance of a horizontal and transcultural art history that emphasises transnational exchanges, cultural encounters and circulation and transformation processes which reveal the mobility of Souths and Norths in very different geographical spaces.<sup>12</sup> Michel Espagne and Michel Werner's theory of cultural transfers is another tool that helps address these questions. This methodology, which is particularly

transnational (in that is interested in the “passage from one cultural object to another”) highlights platforms, mediators and the process of object circulation and resemantisation.<sup>13</sup> Their approach, just like Piotr Piotrowski's proposal for a horizontal art history, helps us start questioning how margins modify the perception of the centre, and appreciating the role of outside impetus. Moreover, horizontal art history also implies a transnational study in order to show the pluralism of transregional histories.<sup>14</sup>

These complex histories, with their inevitable negotiations between local and national contexts, were key to the renewal of aesthetic concepts and semantic transformations in which I have been involved over the past years. My last book, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain*<sup>15</sup>, for example, addresses these processes from within the methodological renewal of art criticism in Spain. The meaning of objects changes when they shift from context to context, and this is also the case for concepts in their negotiations with local contexts. Transnational relationships established between militant Spanish art critics and foreign colleagues and institutions, along with the reception process of new ideas and new aesthetic theories from the outside, were created in a continual process of negotiation with their own experiences of Spain, controlled by a conservative and repressive dictatorship. Thus their understanding of the art world widely exceeded aesthetics. Their discourse inevitably included the social and political fields. The study of the relationship between art criticism and avant-garde in Spain under Franco shows how, based on the circulation of aesthetic theories and concepts (such as “avant-garde”, for example), a collective production was negotiated, hybridised and formed in order to meet the interests and the needs of an activist anti-Francoist culture that organised against the regime as best it could.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Juneja, Monica, “Global Art History and the Burden of Representation,” in Hans Belting, Jakob Birken and Andrea Buddenseig (eds.), *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture* (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 274-297; Piotrowski, “Du tournant spatial ou une histoire horizontale de l’art,” 123-131.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Espagne, “La notion de transfert culturel,” *Revue Sciences/Lettres* [En ligne], 1 | 2013. URL : <http://rsl.revues.org/219>; DOI : 10.4000/rsl.219

<sup>14</sup> Piotrowski, “Du tournant spatial ou une histoire horizontale de l’art,” 127-128.

<sup>15</sup> Paula Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

The negotiations with local contexts, resistance and implicit hybridisation is as inherent to any process of circulation as it is to the writing of history. It corresponds to complex interactions that display “contact zones” and circulation networks, where concepts and ideas spread and were synchronically appropriated by different circles.<sup>16</sup> I believe making these processes visible is an important task in order to display an historic, artistic and pluralistic narrative that coincides with continual negotiations and resistance processes.

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

Art history and the humanities in general are faced with great challenges, at a time when we are witnessing a direct attack against humanities, which has resulted in the loss of their social importance. In addition to budgetary cuts, secondary school and university programmes are giving them less time and sometimes they have simply been done away with. In Spain, like in other countries of the European Union, in order to meet the government's austerity plan, several universities have restructured their faculties and departments, contributing to an increased risk for the relevance and survival of humanities. Yet humanities are more necessary than ever for understanding the world we live in, with its seismic transformations and endemic crises that have been preparing for the past few years on the social, economical and ecological levels; as well as for finding alternatives for the future.

Obviously, it is only through collective action that art history can contribute to the field of humanities, as only an interdisciplinary approach can offer answers to the complexity of the world we live in and to the challenges of rapacious advanced capitalism. In my opinion, it is more crucial than ever to establish interdisciplinary

dialogues, in order to produce complex analyses and reflections, as well as acquiring the necessary tools to do so. As I mentioned earlier, the colonial and imperialist roots of art history unquestionably remain in its DNA, but it is through disciplinary “contaminations” that affect social and applied sciences as well as humanities, that we will be able to reach renewed interpretations and self-criticism of our own discipline. The value of feminist, gender and postcolonial approaches is an example of the richness that this exchange can produce in the setting up of critical readings and the deconstruction of the canonical systems on which art history is built and continues depending on. However, I believe our discipline itself offers sophisticated tools for analysing and understanding images. These tools are strategic for our experience of today's world, an experience that is strongly based on media visibility through digital interfaces and the screens that surround us.

Art history should not only actively contribute to our understanding of the world through its tools for interpreting images, but also through the critical revision process of our past. It is clear that the global turn has forced art history to reassess its approaches, its interpretations and its discourses. De Sousa Santos underlines the link between world justice and cognitive justice. Thus art history, like other humanist disciplines, has a role to play in reclaiming despised knowledge, and to update collectivisation processes and collaboration networks that have been strongly neglected in dominant discourses. In the case of the Cold War period, for example, the immediate and formative prehistory of our global world and the field of my research, I believe that a study based on art history and the history of culture, that connects peripheral geographies and solidarity networks in our immediate past, could offer some of the ideas, values and principles we so badly need.

Critically revisiting our recent history, while remaining conscious of the political value of the praxis of art history, seems crucial to positively contributing to the society in which we live. This is

<sup>16</sup> On this point, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (eds.), *Circulations in the Global History of Art* (New York, London: Routledge, Study in Art Historiography Series, 2015).

why today more than ever, at a time when conservative and xenophobic policies are part of our political and social horizon, it must be clear that, on the one hand, the lines of research we develop are political choices. On the other hand, we must be active and commit ourselves to passing on the ideas produced in the academic and specialised world to society as a whole. One of the great tasks and challenges that lie before us is to help society understand what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how our work is relevant for social cohesion, healing and progress. This goal is still a distant horizon.

In order to reach it, it seems necessary to self-criticise, not only in order to renew art history's discourse, but also to see to what extent these critical approaches have a real impact and how they can have one. For example, it would be useful to determine to what extent the specialised research that we are developing truly helps decolonise our study programmes. In Spain, the overbearing systems for organising and structuring academic programmes means that the diversification of curricula is not up-to-date in many universities. How can we make visible the transformation of approaches and subjects in our respective universities? And how can we integrate these debates to our classrooms? As demonstrated by Rosi Braidotti, we must make an active effort in reinventing academia in the new global context, and to develop an ethical frame that would support an epistemological turn.<sup>17</sup>

I also think we should establish long-term bonds with local communities and social movements in order to exit the exclusive circle of initiates (a task that contemporary art museums have undertaken a while ago already). I believe there is a great deal of work to do, conscious work, in order to find communication strategies and to help our ideas circulate outside of academia with the intention of sharing them. It is not so much a question of going out to preach to the Gentiles, but rather of establishing productive bonds and seeing how art history can feed off of the systems of

collectivisation and sharing that social movements are developing, and how these models can transform the production of knowledge in art history.<sup>18</sup> In order to do this, it would be useful to look to current artistic practices which are, in many cases, creating new exchange models and offering creative and interdisciplinary responses to the many crises that define our global experience.

Translated to English by Phoebe Clark.

<sup>17</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 150.

<sup>18</sup> This paper is a result of the research project of my Ramón y Cajal contract (RYC-2012-11702) funded by the Mineco, as well as the research project: "Modernidad(es) Descentralizada(s): Arte, política y contracultura en el eje trasatlántico durante la Guerra Fría" (ref. HAR2014- 53834-P). I would like to thank Olga Fernández López, Juliane Debeusscher, Tobias Locker and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel for their comments, ideas and proof-reading.