

## Institute of Art History – Art History in a Global Context

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# The Politics of Attention

Paper held at the University of Zurich on May 6, 2013

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I think it is important to start by clarifying what art history in a global context is meant to address, what specific directions are associated with it, even if they can only be determined negatively at first. *One* direction clearly seems to be overcoming the concept of "area studies." This concept was introduced during the Cold War. It is based on the strategy of divide and conquer. The entire world was divided up into "areas" in order to generate complex knowledge with reference to each of these "areas," which could then be used to develop strategic options. The focus was by no means upon questions of art history. Rather, the point was to relate economic, social, political, cultural, and historical aspects to one another to assess the effect of foreign policy, military, and economic influences. However, art history, whether aware of it or not, was subject to this schematization. The concept of "area studies" is presented as outwardly neutral—the various "areas" appear to be completely equal in value—but when it comes to the politics of scholarship and the possible use of knowledge, power imbalances are assumed.

Nevertheless (or rather precisely for that reason), the concept of "area studies" remained very attractive. Even "art history in a global context" will have to establish regional focuses. To the extent processes of circulation, hybridization, networking, translation, and so on, become visible, however, the concept of "area studies" no longer seems appropriate. The establish-

ment of regional focuses in particular has to become the focus again in a new way. The local seems directly connected to the global.

As criticism of the concept of "area studies" grew louder, "modernity studies" were initiated. They were associated, on the one hand, with the effort to leave the Cold War era behind and, on the other hand, with recognition of the fact that processes of modernization were following different courses in various countries and regions of the world because the initial conditions are or were different. Nevertheless, the very term "modernity studies" presupposes a normative Western concept of progress and modernity. Thus, something permissive clings to the view of non-Western cultures. The goal of generating a common, global "modernity" according to the Western model seems to be pre-formulated; the "studies" undertaken are intended to help recognize obstacles along this path and remove them. That cannot be a binding guideline for art history. By contrast, the term "multiple modernities," coined by Shmuel Eisenstadt, has implications that are in some respect diametrically opposed. Whereas the term "modernity studies" ultimately presumes the idea of *one* quality, referred to as "modernity," that is binding for historical orientation, the term "multiple modernities" expresses the assumption that there are a variety of concepts of modernity and quality. In the context of globalization,

there is a focus on processes of (re)particularization. That not only has political implications but is also a challenge to writing history. It is, namely, not clear which observational standpoint should be adopted when describing processes of particularization. Should or must something like a common final orientation toward values be presumed? Or, does that have to be precluded? The concept of "multiple modernities" has yet to be worked out methodologically in a way that would answer that. Above all, it is too closely related to current concerns for it to be clear whether the whole history of humanity (and hence the whole history of art) should be described from the perspective of multiple processes of modernization. That would almost of necessity reestablish ideas of hegemony, since modernization phases are not observed everywhere to the same degree. Can modernity consist of refusing to modernize? How does the concept of modernity relate to the concept of the era? Were the Middle Ages more modern than antiquity? Can the European concept of the "era" or "epoch" be applied to cultural developments on other continents or, conversely, can ideas of historical time developed elsewhere be applied to European history? The concept of "multiple modernities" does not answer any of these questions, or the question of how to deal with different concepts of qualities in a scholarly way.

The terms I have introduced here start from the global and subject it to a particularization, either by dividing the global into different "areas" or by particularizing processes of modernization and generally distinguishing them from things that do not participate in them. By contrast, the term *global context* implies that we should start with the particular, with that which is *not* global but only has a global *context*. Thus, we have here two intersecting perspectives, neither of which can be derived from the other. The history of art as a scholarly discipline would, in my view, be well advised to examine this tension as such and to relate its objects of study—works of art, art institutions, and art-related discourse—to it. No terminologically or theoretically preconceived particularization of the global can be presumed to be absolutely binding.

It may seem even more tempting, however, to look at the global globally as well. This interest is pursued by the concept of "world art history." It is becoming increasingly attractive as a concept for a "grand narra-

tive." For example, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann aggressively advocated it in a recent lecture at the American Academy in Berlin. This is the view that the true task of art history, today, is to offer a kind of complete survey of the evolution of art on the globe that transcends eras. It is thus supposed to adequately take into account processes of circulation, exchange, hybridization, translation, and so on. However, it does this from a supposedly elevated point of view—not necessarily the point of view of an individual art historian, but rather that of the scientific community of art historians. Thus advocates of world art history believe they can answer precisely the questions that, as I just explained, the concept of "multiple modernities" does not answer. It is, however, anything but clear how this claim can be justified. Rather, we are justified in suspecting that the concept of world art history is an attempt to consolidate art history institutionally based on the model of the field of art history as centered on the history of European art. I believe that one of the particular challenges for art history in a global context is to resist being seduced by such a concept and the associated institutional consolidation. That is only possible if we cling to the idea that there is not *one* history but rather multiple "histories"—that is, if we focus critically on strategies of homogenizing, oppressing, and hegemonizing.

The various concepts that might guide an approach to an "art history in a global context" to which I referred are in one way or another problematic from the point of view that Eurocentricity has to be rejected. This point of view seems almost obvious today. But, the very effort to escape Western rationality has repeatedly led to the formation of neo-Oriental oases and scenarios of neo-primitive withdrawal: one need only think of Derrida, who declared that the culture of Chinese writing "interrupted" Western logocentrism; of Foucault, who believed the Western order of things had been suspended by a Chinese encyclopedia; of Roland Barthes, who believed he observed in Japan a revolution in the realm of the symbolic order; of Deleuze and Guattari, who believed they had discovered in nomadism a subversion of capitalist territoriality; of Baudrillard, who referred to societies whose system of symbolic exchange could be regarded as a true alternative to the capitalist exchange of commodities. Western "criticality" produces its own non-Western "vaca-

tion homes." Nothing could be more Eurocentric than this form of intellectual shaping of the Other that claims to be critical, even self-critical. I believe it should be clear that "art history in a global context" cannot be developed in this way.

However, this opens up a set of problems that is more profound than my series of illustrious names of theorists might suggest. For it is very certainly possible that the Other, the non-Western, is not turned into a "vacation home"—as I cavalierly described it—that is, not declaring a genuine alternative to Western rationality but nonetheless approaching ideas of cultural difference in a problematic way. The crux is that as soon as cultural difference is assumed, presumed, or asserted, it has an essentialist effect. The cultural Other seems to be *essentially* Other; but the essence of the Other is based on outside attribution—with all the problems that the claim to such power to define entails. On the other hand, if we wanted to deny cultural difference—for example, by referring to anthropological constants—in order to preclude this problem, it would amount to a kind of naturalization of cultural history, tracing culture back to nature and completely homogenizing nature in the process. One clear indication that people are more aware of these two problems today is the popularity of the term "transculturality." The problem with that, however, is that no one knows exactly what it is and hence how this term can be converted into a methodological instrument for art history. We would like to avoid the problems associated with the concept of cultural difference but also the problems associated with the concept of the universal or with a Western idea of a universal claim. The same interest is the basis for the culturally hermeneutic concept of "transdifference." The motivation for coining these terms derives both from underscoring the inevitability of thinking about difference and from the desire to focus on what (at the same time) is blanked out by such thinking or proves to be problematic in the process. Therefore, thinking about differences has to be transcended under its own premises. That implies a challenge to keep an eye out for alternative perspectives outside of theories of difference but without thereby assuming a universal, homogeneous identity. That can only mean that identity should not be understood as something given or set but rather as some-

thing that only emerges from processes of negotiation and can become either solid or fluid.

I introduced the concepts of transculturality and transdifference more to indicate than to explain the direction that can be observed in the fields of art history and cultural studies today. In doing so, it becomes clear that awareness of the problem has been highly developed but there is no agreement on a terminologically advanced basic concept for its methodology. It is tempting to think that the "future of art history" will provide such a basic concept. I am more than skeptical; not because I question the intelligence of future colleagues—I do not have even the slightest reason to do so—but because the aforementioned terms (or others that are currently being discussed or that we could imagine being discussed) are not and could not be intended to offer the field of art history a (new) methodology. What they do offer are, first, perspectives of questioning and researching and, second, indications of the state of awareness of the problem. In addition, any awareness of a problem will produce a politics of attention. Yet every work of art and every thematic subject an art historian addresses can be understood as a politics of attention or a focusing of attention. The question of what methodology for the field of art history could do justice to "art history in a global context" cannot, therefore, be tied to specific terms. It must rather be understood reflexively: on the one hand, on the level of thematic subject matter: which politics of attention is manifest in a work of architecture, an artifact, an exhibition, an institution, a discourse?; on the other hand, on the level of scholarly treatment: what politics of attention is presumed by the leading terminology and methods of study? That includes the questions of how such politics can be reflected on, imagined, justified, or criticized and how such processes of reflection, imagination, justification, and so on, can be analyzed in a scholarly, self-critical way.

The fact that I speak of politics here is naturally connected to the fact that political factors (in the strict sense but also in the broadest sense) play a crucial role in the production, presentation, and reception of art. Moreover, this in turn is connected to the fact that they also play a central role in funding for scholarship (e.g., in projects with external funding and in research associations) as they do in university education: Every bachelor's or master's program, every point system,

every modularization stands for a politics of focusing attention. But the term "politics" does not stand for coercion but rather for space for free action that should be used and filled with life—especially when dealing with coercion. What we call art stands for breaking through or shifting the habitual politics of attention anchored in the viewer's awareness of perception.

I can only imagine the "future of art history in a global context" as a constant testing ground for concepts and above all for how they are used. That is true, for example, for the term "transculturality." The way it is used today, it stands for old and new relationships of cultural exchange and dynamics of action or for an overcoming of a traditional or traditionalist concept of culture that would like to see cultures as isolatable entities. That concern is warranted. Today, most people orient themselves along the historically horizontal, the progressively historical plane, since people want to describe cultural dynamics of action and processes of translation and identify the actors, interests, and power constellations in that context. As has become clear, such dynamics can be observed in relation not only to modern and contemporary art but in principle to all periods. The concept of transculturality can, however, also be understood in a diachronic, historically vertical sense. A medieval church may still be standing today, but we live not in a medieval culture but a different one—a "global" culture, if you will. However, people in the Middle Ages had their own idea of what the term "global" meant. Hence, the church exists "transculturally" in a "global" sense or "globally" in a "transcultural" sense.

When art history was established as a subject at universities, the interest in a diachronic, historically vertical perspective was much more pronounced than it is today. That was because people believed that the historical evolution of art—meaning European art—had something like an internal set of rules or an inherent *telos* that could be discovered. It would appear that we have lost this faith entirely, although I am not certain that it does not continue to have a subliminal effect (in the project of "world art history," for example), but it can no longer be advocated and justified without being disputed. That does not, however, rule out the issue of historical orientation, either as something art itself establishes or claims to establish or as represented and sought by art history.

The issue of historical orientation should not be equated with an inherent *telos* or an internal logic of art historical evolution. Nor is the assumption of anthropological constants problematic per se. Rather, it is reasonable to presume that people possess the ability to experience things aesthetically and that all art was and is made by human beings for human beings. Nevertheless, that says nothing about what accounts for aesthetic quality and whether art can be measured by the latter. The highly diverse historical developments in art and culture cannot be reduced to a common denominator with respect either to their goal, a *telos*, or to anthropological constants as a structural basis. Nevertheless, a general idea of human self-realization as binding—and connecting—within a historical community should be recognized as one that could and can be conceived under in very different ways and put into practice.

The problems for art history emerge at the latest when certain attributions are made within this horizon of understanding—for example, when so-called "classical Greece" is said to have corresponded to this *telos* in exemplary fashion. Such attributions mark hegemonic claims and imply that historical connections that do not fit into the picture can be ignored. The apparent alternative of a leveling positivist inventory of the surviving products of art and a refusal to judge them cannot solve these problems.

If art historians want to be global in scope, they are confronted to an exceptional degree by questions of comparison—questions that can also lead to the result that the effort to make a comparison can only convey the realization that something that is ultimately incomparable cannot be compared. All comparative studies are therefore dependent on the idea or the limit of a difference that cannot be exposed—that is, a difference that can only be exposed as unexposable. That is already clear from the fact that most of the terms we art historians use are Western in origin, so a comparison with other terminologies and ideas cannot ensure meeting its objectives, as it were.

The assumption of anthropological constants cannot be immediately helpful; rather, it raises problems of its own. Although visual anthropology is currently experiencing a boom, the assumption that a term like "iconoclasm" can be applied equally to the destruction of images in every historical period and every

culture must, in my view, be regarded as highly problematic. Once again, it is the awareness of the problem that initiates a politics of attention. The future of "art history in a global context" can only heighten its awareness of problems and derive its impulses by reflecting on the politics of attention—to those of others as well as our own.

Let me finish my talk with a brief consideration of the "teaser"-questions that were sent to Monica Juneja and me. They are very concrete, or rather, they call for very concrete answers, and this is quite understandable and necessary, if one wants to establish a new master's program. I am afraid, however, that I cannot provide the desired clear objectives and answers, since every single case we focus upon in our studies makes it necessary to develop and design a conceptual framework for its investigation. When we talk about "cases" as we usually do, we already imply that we know a "case of what" something is. "Case of..." implies a general category something has to fit in. Such categories are normally used in order to be able to become more specific in the process of investigation. If we talk, for instance, about "Renaissance painting" we have a general category that allows for a subsumption of many different "cases," and we can proceed in order to focus on specific items, which relate to more specific categories, and even to learn more and more about the uniqueness of a single painting in the process. But most of the established categories are connected with a whole history of value judgments and assumptions that are somehow sedimented within the proper name of the category. It might not be necessary to overturn established value judgments in the first place, but to understand and analyze the historical processes of their institutionalization and to deconstruct their inherent categorization.

When I read the last "teaser"-question: „How does the global context stress dogmas of the discipline as traditional hierarchical value judgments?“ I could not help thinking: the global context per se does not stress anything. It is quite the other way around: the dogmas of the discipline are stressing the global context. Only dogmas that imply the claim to global validity put the global context under stress, because that context cannot correspond to the dogmas. A context is supposed to support the intelligibility of the text, even so, if the text is attacking aspects of its own context. However, the

dogmas we are talking about were established when there was not an awareness of a global context in the contemporary sense. Therefore, they cannot correspond to that context.

When I read the first "teaser question" I felt a similar impulse to turn the implied perspective around. The question was: "How does the global perspective change art historical practices and institutions, such as curating and conservation, museums, and the art market?" My impulse was to ask: "How do, can or should art historical practices and institutions, such as curating and conservation, museums, and the art market, change the global perspective?" In fact, they do it all the time and in many different ways. Of course, the two questions do not contradict each other; one could even say they imply each other. However, the approaches are different. The "teaser-question" starts with the "global perspective" as something "given"; so anything that relates to that somehow has to adapt or correspond with a delay to an already established "global perspective." This approach makes sense, if one considers contemporary power relations, be they political, economic, or technological, on a global scale. Art here plays only a minor role. Historically, however, one might say that it was art, in the first place, that opened up a global perspective. The traveling and exchange of artifacts and artworks and monuments seen by travellers coming from a different cultural background made a global perspective possible in a way that cannot be reduced to power relations.

The second "teaser-question," in my talk, the last one, equally necessitates a change of perspective. The question was: "What are new research objects, research and teaching methods, and alternative narratives?" I think it would not help so much to give a list of new research objects and of methods to be applied to them, but to turn the question around: which alternative narratives do objects of any kind offer to us, and which methodologies for telling and teaching us, do they imply. Any artwork can be understood as the presentation of a methodology that is concerned with our relation to the world, showing and telling us in a presentational, not imposing manner about our "relation that was" and our "relation that may be or may become." Art history should relate to that and derive research and teaching methods from that experience. So please do not mind,

that I was teasing back a little bit in the last section of my talk, because I think it might help the discussion.