

Institute of Art History – Art History in a Global Context

Reflections on Art History's Shifting Global Geographies

Talk given at the University of Zurich on May 6, 2013

Monica Juneja, Heidelberg University

Let me begin by congratulating you on the creation of this innovative teaching program, which comes as a welcome response to the challenges which confront the discipline of art history in the wake of global connectivity, shifting geographies, and the spread of digital media. The position I hold in Heidelberg, the chair of Global Art History, instituted as part of the Excellence Initiative of the German Federal Government – the first and still the only one that carries this designation in Germany – is also intended to be one such response. So perhaps I should position myself on the academic spectrum of those approaches which all carry the epithet “global”. Taking stock of the uses of the term “global” can be a slippery exercise for there are as many interpretations of global as there are people who use it. A recent widely quoted collection edited by James Elkins, *Is Art History Global?* records the proceedings of an art seminar organized by Elkins with a view to hearing different positions on the question posed by the title. The collection indeed is a good example of the Babel of voices and positions on the subject of what the “global” could stand for.

Global art history, as it emerges from these interventions, has been variously read: as a discipline to be practiced uniformly across the globe; one that would subsume “local” art; alternatively as a discipline – also labelled “world art history” – that would encompass different world cultures; or one that searches for the

lowest common denominator to hold together humans across time and space who have been making art for millennia, “because our biological nature has led us to do so” (John Onians). The epithet “global” is at times equated with conceptual imperialism, at others with multicultural eclecticism. Misgivings have been expressed about the hegemonizing tendencies that such an epithet can carry or alternatively, about the diluting of specificity it effects; I do share many of these concerns and hence the urgency to be more precise about the usage of the term.

Let me continue this exercise of framing the field some more before I return to substantial issues of theory and method. Another position in this discussion goes under the designation “world art history” or “world art studies”: constraints of time do not permit me to deal with this here, though I have written about this historiographical approach elsewhere, both in English and German. At this juncture, I would simply like to express my reservations about attempts to bring together in additive sequence – as courses on world art history frequently do – an array of culturally diverse experiences within the framework of concepts whose genealogies go back to Latin antiquity and Kant, and whose histories and underpinnings remain unquestioned. This ends up being one more variant of a master narrative, this time expansively charted to include the “world” within its fold. As a methodological and ped-

agogical move, expansion does not undermine by its analytical intent the frameworks it seeks to transgress, or at best, does so only tangentially.

More fundamental in their scope are postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment, which sensitize us to the construction of art history as a discipline: Donald Preziosi, for instance, designates art history as an empirical science, which claims universality and became in the process one more means of systematically discovering, classifying, analyzing, and fabricating qualitative distinctions between individuals and societies. Preziosi has coined the term "museography" to designate a broad set of interrelated modernist practices, professions, and institutions from academic art history, aesthetic philosophy, museology, and exhibition practices. Taking Preziosi's critique as a starting point, it may be observed that art history in the West has indeed been practiced as a grand Hegelian narrative of progress, a narrative that emerged with the Enlightenment and the industrial nation-states of the 19th century, and evolved in tandem with museums to construct a model history of Western heritage. The critical response of postcolonial studies to Eurocentric perspectives has, however, unwittingly tended to share some of the same premises of that which it criticizes – and this has made it possible for postcolonial positions to be appropriated by nationalist ones. In other words, the postcolonial critique that art history as part of an Enlightenment discourse involved repressing the impossibility of representation has generated responses that frequently argue for the uniqueness and untranslatability of cultures. This stance has lent itself to easy appropriation by the newly independent post-colonial nations of the non-West who then assiduously cultivate a narrative framed by the nation, with *their* museums buttressing through their displays the idea of unique and incomparable achievements of ancient civilizations, now cast as the nation's heritage. We observe this in the case of post-colonial nations in Asia and more recently among the younger post-soviet nations in Central Asia.

Both positions – postcolonial critiques of the West and the perspectives of national identity – end up being mutually constitutive as they rest on similar canonical premises. Both these variants of art historical writing are framed within discrete cultural units – be they national or civilizational – and subsume experiences of cultural braidedness under the taxonomic categories of

"influence", "borrowing", or "transfer". Alternatively, we are all witness to the inflationary use of categories such as "hybridity", problematic not only because over-usage has considerably diluted their explanatory power, but because of their underlying premises. "Hybridity", for instance, remains limited by the presupposition, implicit in the term's indelible biologicistic overtones, of "pure" cultures, which then somehow blend or merge into a "hybrid" that is treated as a state beyond enunciation or articulation. This and other terms such as "creolization" or "métissage" often end up as theoretical straightjackets into which experiences of global relationships can be accommodated without further investigation of the processes and agents involved – and thus at the cost of the precision necessary to grasp their specificity and dynamics. These terms had their uses at the time they were formulated – with a view to sensitize us to border crossings and cultural mixings – and did serve as a groundwork upon which methodological tools could be further sharpened, but today together with other metaphors such as cultural flows, or porous boundaries they do not take the discussion much further.

So much for ground clearing; let me now come to what a notion of "global art history" could possibly look like. My suggestion is to conceptualize "global" as transcultural, a perspective that then could provide a way to rethinking existing disciplinary frameworks. Again, we in Heidelberg are not the first to use the notion of transculturality or transculturation; rather we have built upon earlier studies, and also work together with initiatives similar to ours especially with the research group in Berlin, *Transkulturelle Verhandlungsräume in der Kunstgeschichte*, the title of which brings processuality center stage as does the Heidelberg Cluster of Excellence with its focus on investigating the dynamics of transculturality. This approach departs from that proposed by Wolfgang Iser who has conceptualized transculturality as a condition rather than a process – I have discussed this aspect in detail elsewhere.

Let me now outline some dimensions of a global art history conceived of as transcultural:

1. A transcultural history of art goes beyond the principle of additive extension, and looks instead at the transformatory processes that constitute art practice through cultural encounters and relationships,

whose traces can be followed back to the beginnings of history.

2. Casting art history in a global or transcultural frame would involve questioning the taxonomies and values that have been built into the discipline since its inception and have been taken as universal. To begin with, this would necessitate a closer and more critical empirical examination of art works labeled "Buddhist" or "Islamic" or "Renaissance" or "Modernist", and require constituting new units of investigation that are more responsive to the logic of objects and artists on the move.
3. Rather than postulate stable units of investigation, which exist next to each other and are connected through flows or transfers, the problem of how these units themselves are constituted needs to be systematically addressed. If we proceed on an understanding of culture that is in a condition of being made and remade, historical units and boundaries cannot be taken as given, rather they have to be constituted as a subject of investigation, as products of spatial and cultural displacements. Units of investigation are constituted neither mechanically following the territorial-cum-political logic of modern nation states, nor according to civilizational categories drawn up by the universal histories of the nineteenth century, but are continually defined as participants in and as contingent upon the historical relationships in which they are implicated. This would further mean approaching time and space as non-linear and non-homogenous, defined through the logic of circulatory practices.
4. Looking at the world through a transcultural lens would mean bringing back excluded materials and questions center-stage: in what ways did the presence of objects, not always categorized as "art", from the regions of Asia, Africa, or South America, within collections of European elites, artists, or museums, and their modes of reception, reuse, sale, and display prove to be constitutive of cultural achievements associated with major art movements such as the Renaissance, Rococo, or Cubism? Such a view has the potential to destabilize many of the values that underpin the discipline of art history and as such have remained unquestioned for too long. The modernist elevation of "originality" to measure creativity and the ensuing dichotomy

between the "original" and "copies" or "derivations", for instance, continues to be a cardinal value that informs scholarship in the field. However, a view of historical processes over centuries brings out the centrality of imitation or emulation as a site of cultural practice across regions. Imitation can be a creative form of relating to migrant objects, forms, and practices, of dealing with difference, of acknowledging authority, or of dialogical practice.

5. Global art history is also premised on a transcultural history of concepts. This means taking a more differentiated look at the notion of "epistemological violence" which is one response of practitioners of art history to the challenges posed by globality to the discipline and its conceptual frameworks. In other words, the argument that the use of "Western" analytic frames or concepts – such as art, modernism, or even institutions such as the museum, all considered European in origin – as analytical tools to study non-European cultures involves an epistemological infliction, needs to be considered afresh. Drawing upon anthropological distinctions between emic and etic terms, such relativist positions advocate the use of each tradition's core concepts (Elkins: "indigenous terms") whose incommensurability and untranslatability are assumed. The arguments proffered appear to be premised on a radical relativism that ends up freezing alterity as fixed and ahistorical. It brings through the backdoor the territorial-cum-ideological logic of national identities, which a global or transcultural art history seeks to critically unravel. Instead, we argue that concepts too, like objects, actors, and practices, are mobile and travel from one region to the other, and in doing so grow beyond their parochial origins. For instance while a number of concepts and institutions – art, art history as discipline, the museum, exhibitions – all originated in their modern forms in post-Enlightenment Europe, they did not remain frozen in their local origins, rather have grown beyond these and developed new lives in the course of their transcultural journeys and new contexts where they take root. They continue to grow, as they become reconfigured by other distinct local understandings, usages, and practices, which remain subliminally present in those non-European

contexts, which undergo processes of “modernization” in the course of their histories. Such processes vary from context to context – colonialism could be one framework in which this happens, yet history has seen other forms of encounter with the West experienced in Japan and China, in addition to inner-Asian entanglements. My plea here is for a careful historization of each context and an investigation, drawing on multiple sources, of the specific questions it throws up rather than ahistorical explanations that rest on critical theory alone. To take an example from South Asia, a regional context with which I am best familiar: here we are confronted with terms in different languages to designate the notion of art or image. Many such terms are used in canonical texts, yet the history of the texts themselves is not stable. None of the terms offers a transparent or unnegotiated set of meanings on visual representations or aesthetic ideals; rather definitions evolve through complex interactions between texts, agents who interpret and transmit them and myriad practices. A purely lexical *Begriffsgeschichte* is not adequate; rather art or aesthetic practice is a field where textual representations are both rendered into form as artistic production and in turn work to recast the concept. A conceptual history would therefore need to work across disciplines and media to unravel relationships between normative terms and artistic practice and reception. In what ways did concepts participate in historical entanglements through time – e.g. the advent of Islamic and later European theories and practices of visual representation – and take on new incarnations? Similar methods would be fruitful to address a range of conceptual categories, for instance the notion of modernism itself. For long viewed as a quintessential European phenomenon, which then “spread” to the rest of the world, modernism has undergone critical scrutiny in recent years. Studies of modernism “from the peripheries” – such as interventions by Geeta Kapur and Partha Mitter from the perspective of South Asia or the recent book by Alicia Volk on modernist currents in Japan – have questioned its monolithic nature and argued for an expanded definition that would include the aesthetic experiments and practices of modernist artists in Asia, Africa,

and Latin America. The engagement with visual practices beyond the metropolitan centers of the West cannot stop at adding or pluralizing these as “multiple modernities” which exist alongside each other in an undisturbed manner. Instead, it raises further questions: how is our understanding of modernist and avant-garde art practices reconfigured if viewed as emanating from networks of multiple centers across the globe, adding New Delhi, Bombay, Shanghai, Rio de Janeiro, Seoul, or Tokyo to Paris, Berlin, and New York? Instead of coining a host of modernisms – Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan in addition to the Western which implicitly remains canonical while others are “alternatives” – all understood as parallel streams that never meet and bring in national or ethnic units through the back door, a global view of modernism regards these as enmeshed with the others, which allows us to begin asking, to what extent such entanglement was constitutive for a Western avant-garde. Can European modernism be historically studied without situating it within the larger, complex political and cultural determinations of colonialism and global connections that made its emergence possible? Dismantling the master narrative of modernism would mean fixing anew its chronological signposts which in the present discourse depend on the gap between the already developed modern and the “not yet”, trapped in a perpetual effort to “catch up”. Instead it is in the “elsewheres” and the “not yet” that a global modern could be sought and found.

6. This brings me to the final point, the dismantling of binaries we often deploy as analytical tools. I will take only two examples, both related to the study of modern and contemporary art: global/local, tradition/modernity. Global and local are constructed as opposites, though at the same time we recognize that each is formed by the other. In the binary view, the global gets cast as cultural homogenization/dissolution of local specificity and the local then is seen as oppositional, as a space of resistance and of authentic cultural tradition; alternatively – a position that comes from anthropology of globalization – we have become accustomed to the opposition between complete flux following dissolving boundaries and bounded local spaces. It

is an opposition which on the one hand ignores the fractures within the locality, which is both a space of retrieval – though not necessarily reducible to one of ethnic nostalgia – and at the same time a fissured space where today's vocabularies about autonomous interventionist art do not find uniform resonance. Global, on the other hand, together with its imperializing power, can also open up possibilities of forms of critical cosmopolitanism, which make new alignments possible, create a space for self-reflexive agency. Transcultural art history, because it defines its units in a flexible way following the logic of the agency of actors and objects, allows you to explore different kinds of constellations and regional connections – a more nuanced multi-level analytical frame than one determined by the bald local/global opposition or notions with limited explanatory power such as “glocal” or “hybrid”.

To take the example of South Asia, once more: in a colonized region of the world, both nation and locality have an ambivalent position in relation to the global. Many histories of colonized regions inevitably bring back the nation as one frame within which modernism's critical edge has been appropriated. Modernism was imposed on the non-Western world as a form of Eurocentric universality that made up the hegemonic operations of imperialism. At the same time, the critical, affirmative, and reflexive potential of the concept energized anti-colonial resistance that pluralized, inflected and translated its metropolitan meanings within the frame of an emergent national culture. The nation also played an important role as locality, as a site or territory to be wrenched back from the global constellation of empire. On the other hand, nation building in South Asia during and following decolonization was torn apart by dilemmas, which in many ways provide a counter-example to Benedict Anderson's thesis that the modern nation is a universal, secularized formation. Violent exclusions and conflicts, the drawing up of new maps by administrative authorities, partitioning South Asia into individual nation states, physical, rhetorical, and symbolic struggles – all provided a site and a host of subjects for a passionate body of works that make modern art outside of its metropolitan centers a set of complicated, contradictory, and variegated experiments working both within the nation and using modernist reflexivity to lay bare the

fissures within the mythical imagined community. In the same way, the uses of “tradition” by artists across the globe are more complex and cannot be reduced as opposition to “modernity”: tradition can be both enabling as well as a trap to be broken open. Our understanding of the avant-garde – to be legible – needs a set of pre-existing codes and institutions cast as outdated and academic against which to rebel. In sites without such established structures, modernism involved at the same time creating new institutions such as artists' collectives, exhibition spaces, journals, and a language of art criticism.

Looking at the work of artists from South Asia, it becomes apparent that for many, locality could be used as a site of the cosmopolitan: artistic subjectivities and practices can engage in dialogical interactions, which are transcultural. Contemporary Asian artists do not reject the notion of “art” as a Western imposition, instead they often redefine it by imbuing it with an ethical-cum-political content, questioning the assumption that political awareness in a work of art works to dissolve the autonomy of the work and detract from its aesthetic value. The search for an ethics of the self often takes the path of dialogical practice, of collective production, also across porous disciplinary lines. Collective practice effects a critique of artistic ontology qua the artist and questions the enduring modernist legacy of the artist as an autonomous and individual creator.