

West and the rest: global art world and negotiating the terms of cultural exchange

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The notion of the global art world, which raised in the 1990s as a part of a larger discussion on questions of globalization, may be regarded both within the context of contemporary market economy (the production of cultural prestige and the conversion of capitals as defined by Pierre Bourdieu), and as an extension of the Western concept of art, together with the specific cultural and political values it came to represent. In my talk I would like to focus on this second aspect, which refers to the long-lasting Western tradition of thought that supported the notion of art as an imagined universal space of creativity, free expression and communication. It might be questionable, whether contemporary global art world can be regarded as a true heir to these humanistic ideals, or more often as their cynical semblance, serving more limited ideological and economic interests of particular agents. As a matter of fact, its real openness and inclusiveness should rather be measured in each case by asking: Who speaks? To whom? On what conditions? What is the agency of this speech?

The Western notion of art used to be remarkably inclusive (although not democratic), working as an embodiment of the West's specific impulse to collect. In modern times, everything that could be contemplated and appropriated as an aesthetic object, whatever its initial function and origin, might have been granted art's name. André Malraux's "Musée Imaginaire" was probably the last and most spectacular expression of this mode of aesthetic inclusiveness, particularly open to the "artistic" production from outside the West. The recent replacement of the Musée des Arts Africaines et Océaniens in Palais de la Porte Dorée in Paris, established under Malraux in 1960, by the newly created Musée de l'Histoire de l'Immigration (opened in 2007) may be regarded therefore as a symbolic shift, marking the rejection of the former aesthetic outlook – the generalized Western man's view of non-Western ("primitive") cultures – and bringing new focus on complex human histories and worldly interconnections between (post)colony and metropolis. Artworks are no longer presented here as eternalized objects, but as the means to communicate personal stories, whereas the distinctions between "artwork", social action, and "document" become blurred. Contemporary works by artists-immigrants, conceived as testimony or critical intervention, are also included to speak for those who share such experience themselves.

The issue of artistic globalization, accompanied by the arguments of post-colonial critique, is often raised to question the West's epistemic authority, its privileged perspective, and the

established canons and narratives of art history.<sup>1</sup> The new interest in non-Western artistic cultures may be understood in this context as an attempt to break the old hegemony, or even to deconstruct it from within (for example by pointing to cultural and economic interdependencies in the past). It may also bring a wider consciousness of other cultures' histories in their complex relations with the West and Western modernization (thus bringing to the fore the notion of the "multiple modernities" instead of the singular model of Western modernity). In a more critical view, however, the most manifest phenomena of art globalization: the spectacular rise of some non-Western artistic figures, and the growing market for their work, may still be regarded as an appropriation the exotic Other<sup>2</sup>, giving fuel to international (mostly Western) art institutions, which take pride of their "advancement" in today's globalizing world. As Hans Belting caustically remarked, "Difference, with the label of a foreign culture, has become marketable, and an entrance ticket for newcomers on the art market."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the development of art biennials and art museums across the world (competing for public attention with the more traditional European and American venues), often serves the new localities' ambitions to symbolically join the "developed" part of the world, without necessarily sharing its democratic ideas and civic standards. An appropriation of artistic discourses developed in the West – established styles and languages of commentary, becomes an ambivalent sign of cultural "progressiveness," suggesting (quite misleadingly) an affirmation of Western liberal values (Louvre Abu Dhabi museum being a significant case in point).

Against these divergent policies and ideological objectives of art institutions, there is a growing artistic production by contemporary non-Western artists – often educated in the West, making use of the now-familiar means of mixed-media, installation, or conceptual art, who want to conceive their work as a mode of critical intervention and socio-political comment. In their understanding of the function of art they share its notions widely accepted in the West, historically grounded in avant-garde artistic traditions. Despite their work being focused on the social and political realities of their countries of origin, sometimes it happens to be more openly received and exhibited in Western countries than at home. It might be

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, trans. by Caroline Saltzweid (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 192–198. *The Global Contemporary. The Rise of New Art Worlds after 1989*, edited by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013), 6–7.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Harris, "Gatekeepers, Poachers and Pests in the Globalized Contemporary Art System," *Third Text* 27, no. 4 (2013):538–540.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art. A Critical Estimate," in *The Global Art World. Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, edited by Andrea Buddensieg and Hans Belting (Odtfieldern: Hatje Cranz, 2009), 56.

puzzling to call such artists “non-Westerns,” since their position is apparently “in between,” and their art evades any simplified understanding of Western and non-Western identities. As far as they identify artistic practice as a space of free speech, where cultural and political critique can be developed, they seem however to perpetuate a specifically Western understanding, which came to being in the course of modern Western history.