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The Global History of Art and the Challenge of the Grand Narrative

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**Art History and
the Global Challenge:**

A Range of Critical Perspectives

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Editorial Statement

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The *ARTL@S BULLETIN* is a peer-reviewed, transdisciplinary journal devoted to spatial and transnational questions in the history of the arts and literature.

The journal promises to never separate methodology and history, and to support innovative research and new methodologies. Its ambition is twofold: 1. a focus on the “transnational” as constituted by exchange between the local and the global or between the national and the international, and 2. an openness to innovation in research methods, particularly the quantitative possibilities offered by digital mapping and data visualization.

By encouraging scholars to continuously shift the scope of their analysis from the national to the transnational, *ARTL@S BULLETIN* intends to contribute to the collective project of a global history of the arts.

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The Global History of Art and the Challenge of the Grand Narrative

It might seem rather early to propose an assessment of the famous ‘global turn’ in the history of art. However, the challenge of globalisation and of the ‘decolonization’ of our thought is now a daily preoccupation for many art historians. Research posts dedicated to these questions have been created in universities, and books are regularly published on the globalisation of art. The study of globalisation has even become a disciplinary specialty in itself, with an ever expanding vocabulary and an increasing number of schools of thought. There are those who understand ‘global’ as referring to ‘peripheries’ (as in World Art Studies),¹ whilst for others it is a question of ‘postcolonial’ problematics. Others still focus on ‘transnational’ or ‘translocal’ logics; some discuss ‘centres and peripheries’ whilst others reject this binary.² Some study ‘influence’, others ‘métissage’, ‘cultural transfers’, or ‘resemanticization’ and the changes in meaning that occur with circulation. There are those who dismiss the possibility of a global opening-up – and by extension the possibility of a global history of art – altogether. They point, justifiably, to the fact that this push for openness comes mostly from researchers on either side of the North Atlantic.³ Against this renewed hegemony of former colonial systems, some push for a ‘decolonization’ of thought and warn against the distinctly western

pretensions towards universality that often underpin global approaches. Together, all these debates have made global problematics amongst the most dynamic in the history of art today. Ambitious collective programmes have been set up to work at the unconventional scales called for by such questions, and to better take into account non-canonical regions and art forms. The history of art is opening up to peripheries of all kinds, and accepting (or not) increasingly profound re-evaluations and interrogations.

This turn seems to be manifesting itself more slowly, however, in public collections and public opinion. To be ‘truly global’, museums would need to possess the kind of collections that they simply do not – even though some seek to assert, somewhat disingenuously, the superiority of their ‘global’ holdings. I can personally speak about my ‘local’ collections, those which I know the best: the ‘global’ hanging at the Centre Pompidou which was revealed to the public in 2013. While this presentation featured works by artists from ‘peripheral’ countries, for the most part these were figures already well integrated into the Parisian market and not infrequently working in the city.⁴ To what extent was this hanging truly ‘global’ and ‘open’? The works supposedly ‘rediscovered’ in 2013 by the team charged with studying ‘globalisation’ had in fact been purchased over the 20th century for the institution’s public collections, in order to present the actuality of Parisian art;

¹ See Siegfried Van Damme and Kitty Zijlmans (éd.), *World Art Studies. Exploring Concepts and Approaches* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008).

² Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Circulations in the Global History of Art* (New York and London: Routledge, Study in Art Historiography Series, 2015); Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennals, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (London: Wiley & Blackwell, 2016).

³ James Elkins, “Art History as a Global Discipline”, in James Elkins (ed.), *Is Art History Global?* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

⁴ *Modernités plurielles* : <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/media/imp/M5050/CPV/9d/65/M5050-CPV-c793336c-9e46-46c6-9d65-d23db760380e.pdf> (6 April 2017).

they had not been bought to make up for the (ongoing) absence of peripheries at the Musée national d'art moderne. We can be forgiven for remaining sceptical, then, when we are told that this hanging enacts "a rebalancing of the different world regions that will propose an enlarged geography of art."⁵ This presentation which ostensibly spoke about 'globalisation' was above all the fruit of the encounters and dealings of the Parisian art scene, surrealist circles in particular. Another frustrating element of this exhibition was its assumption that the presence of 'African' statues and 'Oceanic' masks constituted a 'global' approach, 'open to peripheries',⁶ even as it failed to contextualize these works and remained silent on what were precisely phenomena of globalisation: who made these works, and where? When? In what (likely) context of predatory colonialism? Who purchased, or stole, these works? How did they travel, and along which trajectories? Who resold them, and what theories did they use to promote them? Through which circuits parallel to those of colonial globalisation did they circulate? Of course, as we so often hear, for museums to address artistic globalisation in a satisfying manner, they would need more money and more expertise. We should rightly celebrate the increasing recruitment of of curators specializing in art from the Middle East and Latin American by major museums such as the Tate or the MoMA in 'major' countries— even if these posts are at times financed with funds from dubious sources. However, the problem has perhaps less to do with money and expertise than with our own narratives.

In order to propose a 'global history', one that would do justice to art from all continents, and in particular from those that have long been neglected and scorned, the ideal solution comes in the form of an articulation of a truly global narrative. This story would be emancipated not only from the hierarchical binaries ingrained in the canon (ancient/modern, fine art/decoration,

classic/kitsch), but would also need to go beyond the production of new hierarchies that are generated even by postcolonial narratives (dominant/dominated). How might we produce a narrative which also connects 'local' collections and 'international' ones? How might curators show – visually, with just a few words – the link between objects and disciplines long excluded from the fine arts (African ceremonial masks or Mexican rugs, for example) and the practices that have traditionally been studied by museums? How might such links be reinforced in such a way as to go beyond the mere identification of formal similarities, a step which does not allow a narrative to emerge, but which does risk veering towards simplistic conclusions of 'influence' or 'predation'? This is what thousands of articles and books seek to do, and it is perhaps a feat that is more easily pulled off in writing than through exhibitions and innovative hangings. More than anything, we are perhaps lacking alternative and convincing narratives with which to challenge the canon. There are few synthetic accounts which manage to discuss 'everything' whilst avoiding a separation of art by country and by medium. The weakness of alternative narratives allows the canon's power to go largely unchecked, as it is usually the first history of art which we encounter. It is regrettable that canonical history today represents the only clear story, and a dramatically simple and convincing one at that: a history of successive innovations that break time and again with a constantly outmoded past; a history of a heroic drive for an ever greater autonomy and independence, a history of subversion and resistance to material, political, economic, and social logics. A fine story, then: a fairy tale in which marginal artists never fail to triumph. The 'global' artists and movements that have enjoyed the greatest success in the cultural and institutional sphere have been those that allowed for the incorporation of new heroes into the existing story: Tarsila Do Amaral, Joaquín Torres García, Toyen, and so on. These figures could enter the canon without challenging its model, and so the canon welcomed them. Non-canonical art and

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ A view of the exhibition: http://payload72.cargocollective.com/1/8/261597/3752552/IMG_2221okWEB_905.jpg (6 April 2017)

artists whose work does not satisfy the criteria of originality, innovation, rupture, subversion, and resistance are left scattered across a broad and discontinuous field of individual, personal, and differentiated stories that is difficult, if not impossible, to consider as a whole.

Offering up a coherent succession of -isms, canonical history has left a seemingly indelible mark on far too many minds. If its sway over minds – of the relatively well educated public that attends museums, of the academics who run them, and of art historians, myself included – is to be weakened or broken, more effective – more seductive – stories will have to be proposed. This is perhaps a naïve desire, one that we ought to renounce sooner rather than later – particularly when all narratives tend to impose order and hierarchies, to forget, condemn, simplify, and exclude. But this would be a shame, as there is no convincing reason that the canon cannot be replaced by something else. People crave narratives, and grand ones at that. Without stories that are clearer, more convincing, and more seductive than those of the canon, the ‘global history of art’ risks leaving the current state of affairs largely intact and being more dislocated and ‘dislocal’ than global.

Where could these new stories come from? We have sought to interrogate actors from the world over who are interested in new and global practices in the history of art. We have looked to discover how they view the state of the sub-discipline which the global history of art has become, and more generally how they consider the artistic and academic globalisation that has accompanied its emergence. In doing so, we hope to counter the waning of a phenomenon, namely that of international conferences and meetings, to which the global approach to art history owes a good deal. After something of a golden age, when such encounters were relatively common and research programmes well-funded, when intellectual curiosity on global topics seemed to be abundant and shared by many, it seems we may be entering a lean spell: borders are closing,

university resources dwindling, and global projects falling out of favour with public authorities who prefer to promote national ones, and international exchanges no longer seem to be a priority in political circles. Yet these trends also mean that the question of global art history seems to us more urgent than ever.

The writers published in this volume come from varied cultural, academic, and generational backgrounds. We would like to thank them for having kindly accepted to reply to our questions. We allowed them a free choice in terms of the language in which they wanted to respond – whereas many of them are regularly confronted with one of the major challenges of decentring, expressing oneself in a foreign language. Our survey should be considered as a dialogue in progress, one that we will continue throughout 2017. Those who wish to join this collective reflection are very much welcome to do so.