

# IS MODERNITY MULTIPLE?

KEITH MOXEY

Barnard College, Columbia University

“At a given moment, then, we are confronted with numbers of events which, because of their location in different areas, are simultaneous only in a formal sense. Indeed, the nature of each of these events cannot properly be defined unless we take the position into account in its particular sequence. The shaped times of the diverse areas overshadow the uniform flow of time.” (Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 147.

Modernity and its artistic partner modernism have always been tied to the star of temporal progress. The time of modernity was not only teleological but its home lay in the West. In this sense, “multiple modernities” is an oxymoron, a logical contradiction.<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, the exhibition entitled *The Short Century*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, that took place in New York, among other venues, in 2001-2002.<sup>2</sup> The show presented a survey of a number of African movements during the second half of the twentieth-century not previously included in standard histories of modernism: spin-offs of European and American art forms, as well as survivals of indigenous traditions dating from pre-colonial times. Fascinating as these artistic initiatives and works might be, the claim that they deserve scholarly attention and aesthetic appreciation constituted a challenge to the history of modernism. The triumphal progression from one avant-garde movement to another leading ever more reductively towards greater and greater abstraction, traced by its dominant narrative, simply does not translate into these circumstances. African art typically functions as one of the global shadows that sets off the brilliance attributed to the Euro-American trajectory as it moves from cubism to abstract expressionism and beyond – a necessary backdrop for the performance of those appearing on the “world’s stage.” Only now, after the modernist story has itself petered out and its internal contradictions exposed, has a space for the artistic traditions of other cultures become visible.

The work of the South African Gerard Sekoto offers a compelling example of the art that it is now possible to “see.”<sup>3</sup> *Two Friends* (fig.1), painted in Johannesburg in 1941 before Sekoto’s departure for Paris in 1948, represents two women seen from the rear, chatting, as they walk along arm-in-arm. Once-upon-a-time our

<sup>1</sup> Discussions of the asymmetrical power relations that have marked modern non-Western artistic production pervade the scholarly literature see, for example, Gerardo Mosquera, “Some Problems in Transcultural Curating,” in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts* ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press and The Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994), 133-139; Everlyn Nicodemus, “Inside. Outside,” in *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1995), 29-36; Sydney Kasfir Littlefield, *Contemporary African Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999); Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977); *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s Artists and the Avant-Garde 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion, 2007) and “Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery,” *Art Bulletin* 90 (2008), 531-548; Geeta Kapur, “When Was Modernism in Indian Art?” in *When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000), 297-324; Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visibility in Early Modern China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House; Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998); “Modernities in Art: How are they Other?” in Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme eds., *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008), 401-418; Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn eds., *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998); Rasheed Araeen, Sean Cubitt, Ziauddin Sardar, eds., *The “Third Text”*

*Reader on Art, Culture, and Theory* (London: New York: Continuum, 2002); Kobena Mercer, ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge: Mass.: MIT Press and London, Institute of International Visual Arts, 2005); Mercer, ed., *Exiles, Diasporas and Strangers* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Okwui Enwezor, ed., *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* (Munich: Prestel, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> For Sekoto, see, Lesley Spiro, *Gerard Sekoto. Unsevered Ties*, exh. cat. (Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery, 1989); Barbara Lindop, *Sekoto* (London: Pavilion, 1995); N. Chabani Mangani, *A Black Man Called Sekoto* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1996); Christine Eyene, "Sekoto and Negritude: The Ante-Room of French Culture," *Third Text* 24 (2010), 423-435.

appreciation of the image might have been determined by where and when it was created. The fact that it was made in Johannesburg rather than Paris would have determined our response. The recognition of its style as Post-Impressionist, inspired perhaps by the work of Van Gogh or Gauguin, rather than by either French Surrealist artists or American Abstract Expressionists who were the African artist's contemporaries, made it less worthy of our attention. Its failure to participate in modernism's temporal progression, its irrelevance to the work of the "avant-gardes," assigned it to the margins if not the dustbin of history. So the question is: *what is the time of this work?* If it resists incorporation into the dominant story of mid-century Euro-American modernism, then where does it belong? Olu Oguibe argues that Sekoto's painting and that of other African artists who attempted to incorporate aspects of European art into their work rather than the traditional native art forms deemed more "authentic," constituted its own form of national-



Fig. 1 – Gerard Sekoto, *Two Friends*, 1941 (Johannesburg Art Gallery Collection)

ism.<sup>4</sup> Sekoto, and others like him, saw in the colonial desire to deny African artists access to a modernist pictorial rhetoric a means of essentializing the differences between colonizers and colonized. Their refusal to participate in this aspect of apartheid is demonstrated in their art.

The role of Sekoto's painting in my story, however, is not there so much to argue the aesthetic value of his work so much as to illustrate the limitations of a system: modernism's narrative can only operate by excluding him. This observation will, needless to say, neither change the way we view Sekoto, nor affect the continuing dominance of that story. Sekoto's absence from art's "history" depends on the economic, political, and ideological powers that determine the relations between cultures. If art history's narrative of choice is still the modernist one, it is because of forces that have little to do with the work itself or even our response to it. My point is that Sekoto belongs to another temporality. His time was not synchronous with that of metropolitan modernism and never can be. If modernism's time was multiple – if its time flowed at different speeds in different situations, if art history had one paradigm by which to understand developments in one context and another to cope with those taking place in others and such paradigms were not hierarchically organized – only then could his story be told. What then might be the relation between Sekoto's absence from the dominant history of art of the twentieth century and his presence in the history of South African art? Are these narratives forever distinct and incommensurable, or can one be translated into the other? Sekoto was a contemporary of Jackson Pollock, yet these artists' circumstances could not have been more different. If Sekoto worked in the period known as modernity, yet did not belong to it because he was prevented from participating in one of its characteristic features, artistic modernism, how do we negotiate the time that separates them?

The example offered by *The Short Century* exhibition, and others like it, allows us to think anew about issues of time and their relation to art. Art history has long restricted the study of "modern" and "contemporary" art to the nations of Western Europe and the United States, rather than to those parts of the globe "discovered" during the age of colonialism. Applied to the artifacts of non-European civilizations as a means of accounting for their extraordinary appeal and presence by those who first encountered them, the concept of "art" afforded a means by which the incommensurate character of subaltern cultures might be related to the epistemological assumptions of the dominant ones – even if the lack of congruence was often striking. Regardless of how inadequate the process of translation, the protean nature of "art" rendered intelligible, and thus accessible, artifacts that are radically alien to the European world-view. A visit to the Louvre, or the Metropolitan Museum for that matter, may begin with the sculptures of Greece and Rome, or European Renaissance and Baroque painting in which the eighteenth-century notion of aesthetics finds its roots, but sooner or later (usually later), the visitor wanders into areas that display Oceanic door lintels and canoe paddles. Such objects, never originally conceived of as "art," both legitimate and find legitimation in their new surroundings.

<sup>4</sup> Olu Oguibe, "Reverse Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art," in *The Third Text Reader on Art, Culture and Theory*, ed. Rasheed Araeen, Sean Cubitt, and Ziauddin Sardar (London: Continuum, 2002), 35-47 and 351-353.

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). For a more recent discussion see Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Despite the malleability of the concept of “art,” the study of objects produced in geographical locations beyond the European pale, has usually been confined to those created before the moment of contact. Romantic fascination with the “other” tended to freeze European interest in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Cultural artifacts could be ascribed the status of “art” only so long as they remained “traditional,” i.e., distinctly non-European. Ironically enough, an invisible apartheid dictated that anything manifesting the cultural exchange resulting from the colonial enterprise – anything, that is, that betrayed an awareness of the intervention of the colonizers in the lives of the colonized – was to be avoided as derivative and second-rate. The distinction between the colonizers and the colonized, usually marked by race, served to reinforce the sense of superiority of the white adventurers whose economic and military might ruled the world. Such attitudes were further confirmed by the philosophical ideas of the late eighteenth century, the age of the so-called Enlightenment, when an epistemological system based on ideas of rigorous objectivity, guaranteed an insatiable desire to know (and thus control) the world and everything in it. Political and economic transformations such as the French and Industrial Revolutions enhanced the notion that Europeans had arrived at the end of time – that they looked back on the history of the world as a prelude to their own supremacy.

The gradual process of decolonization that accelerated after World War II has not disabused the former colonial cultures of their sense of superiority. Histories of modern and contemporary art sometimes continue to be told as if the only cultural artifacts of the twentieth century that matter are those produced in Europe and the United States. The belief persists because of the continuing grip of a progressivist notion of historical development. Not only is Europe still very often the fulcrum of civilization, but its most advanced manifestations are thought to be discernible in the arts. Artistic modernism and Euro-American art of the twentieth century have been indelibly marked by such a teleological thrust. Each aesthetic movement, heralded by a group identified by the military metaphor of the “avant-garde,” sought to supersede its predecessor in the name of intellectual or spiritual progress.

Modernity, along with artistic modernism, is a distinctly western affair. If the colonized globe took on many of the economic and industrial, not to mention the political and cultural trappings, of the colonizers, there remains little doubt as to where the center of artistic life shines brightest. There may indeed have been movements such as Latin American conceptualism that coincided with similar ones that took place in Europe and the United States, for example, but they are often characterized as provincial echoes, pale shadows of their counterparts at the center of temporal power. Despite the fact that some were distinct, even entirely different from their European equivalents, they are not considered as important as those that transpired in the centers of economic and political power.

This background is, of course, well known. I rehearse it here only as an introduction to a particular argument about the nature of time. If modernity, defined as a set of

institutions and technological processes that shape the economic and political life of many of the world's peoples, has become a global aspect of every human experience, does that mean that it has the same significance everywhere? Is the time of modernity the same in London and Johannesburg? Both England and South Africa are nation states with democratic forms of political organization, and to greater or lesser extent both are industrialized nations, yet does modernity's clock run at the same speed and have the same density in the two places? "Is modernity multiple?" The modernist movement in the arts has been decisively challenged and no longer serves as the motivation for most contemporary art. Beginning in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the narrative of progress ascribed to artistic production by influential critics such as Clement Greenberg, was called into question.<sup>6</sup> No longer was it possible to distinguish "art" from "non-art" on the basis of whether a work seemed to encourage the movement of the spirit in history, or in Greenberg's case, whether the medium in which it materialized was more or less aware of its "essential" nature. Artists and critics have tired of the idea that an "avant-garde" can define art's future. Arthur Danto, following Hegel, argues, for example, that art has come to an end only in order to become philosophy. The impossibility of distinguishing Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* from the commercial product they replicate means that works of art can no longer be distinguished from other objects. When modernism draws its last breath, it is not succeeded by another period, but all time becomes "post-historical."<sup>7</sup>

Is this then contemporaneity? Does the end of modernism coincide with the end of time? Whether or not we agree with Danto that artistic modernism ended for the reasons he cites, there is general critical agreement that artistic production is no longer motivated by its relation to time. Does this consensus then mean that history is over, or rather that we need histories that acknowledge that time moves at multiple speeds in different locations? Absurd though it seems at first blush, the idea that history might be finished has certain compelling attractions. Decoupling art from time, for example, the aesthetic from the temporal, is often cited as one of the factors that has allowed non-Euro-American art to conquer the contemporary international art scene. If artistic movements cannot be guaranteed by a privileged relation to time then how can their works be accepted as "art" rather than as mere objects? The context offered by this confusion, one in which aesthetic theories struggle with one another and none is acknowledged as all-encompassing, has favored experimentation of the most varied kind. In the urge, however, to celebrate the "arrival" of non-Euro-American art forms in the world's art markets, biennials, art fairs, and exhibitions centers (*Kunsthalle*), have time differentials disappeared? In welcoming the inspiration provided by the imaginations of so many new contemporary artists, must we believe that they all operate on the same temporal footing? Has the idea of time, so inextricably identified with "progress," and therefore the property of the world powers responsible for industrialization and colonialization, been genuinely democratized? Can works of art appearing in places not previously identified with the privileged

<sup>6</sup> For Greenberg, see his *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1961). For reflections on art history's modernist moment, see Thomas McEvilley, "Art History or Sacred History?" *Art and Discontent: Theory at the Millenium* (New York: McPherson, 1991), 133-167. Art history's linear trajectory has been most forcefully challenged by Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art*, trans. Christopher Wood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte. Eine Revision nach zehn Jahren* (Munich: Beck, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Danto, "Introduction: Modern, Post-modern, and Contemporary," *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3-19.



<sup>8</sup> For a fascinating discussion of such issues see, Harry Harootunian, "Remembering the Historical Present," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007), 471-494.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Galison, *Einstein's Clocks, Poincaré's Maps: Empires of Time* (New York: Norton, 2003), 144-155.

"home" of time now be treated more seriously? If time has no privileged location, do all its forms contend for equal attention?<sup>8</sup>

If time no longer bears a necessary relation to art, is art consequently unmarked by its passage through it? Is it impossible to determine the age of art, to identify the subjects and styles that dominate particular periods? Is the time of the metropolitan centers of political and economic power really no different from those on the periphery? The fate of art in a "post-historical" moment, of course, is part of a much larger debate about the nature of history itself. The discussion as to what, if anything, comes after modernism continues unabated. Is its demise to be identified with the dawn of postmodernism, or does time stretch on without identity?

In the present context, it would be disingenuous not to recognize the existence of a "dominant" time historically related to that imposed under colonialism – a system whose homogenizing ambitions are still implicit in the designation "Greenwich Mean Time" as the longitude from which the world's time zones are established.<sup>9</sup> If the times that were suppressed in the interest of modernism's evolutionary narrative can now enter the spotlight, it cannot be on the basis of history's abolition but rather on an understanding that history and power are inextricably entwined. The term "multiple contemporaneities," draws attention to the unequal speeds at which time unfolds in different locations. Their "speed," however, is assessed by the dominant cultures of the day. The cessation of modernism's linear time provides us with an opportunity to look around the edges of the canonical accounts of the recent past, as well as of the present. The challenge is not to dissolve historical periods, not to abandon narrative, so much as to create new ones that reflect the ever-changing nature of geographical (very often national) power relations. The effort to distinguish between moments in time, as well as the desire to conflate them, still dramatizes the necessity to make meaning of their relation to one another.

Sekoto's fate in falling out of the canon of "modernist" artists of the twentieth century has resonance, of course, for the fate of contemporary artists working in cultures other than those of Europe and the United States. Like Sekoto's painting, their work operates in two different conceptual worlds. In one, Sekoto is a cipher, a late-comer, someone who worked in antiquated artistic styles long after the "progressive" artists of the day had gone on to other things. In the other, he daringly sought to appropriate the art of the colonial culture (itself provincial) of which he was a part in order to participate in a system that denied him admittance on the basis of his color. Whether or not contemporaneity is understood as a form of time or its absence, whether contemporaneity follows modernism as a period, or whether it is the end of time, the work of non-Euro-American artists will forever register on different levels. It is only when the kaleidoscope of values that informs the powerful markets of the artistic capitals of western culture can accommodate those working on the periphery that it is possible for their work to move from one context to another. Only when non-Euro-American works either manifest interests that parallel those working at the center, or more interestingly, when the periphery is a source of inspiration, that "cross-overs" are possible.

If contemporaneity is conceived as a temporal framework in which many non-synchronous forms of time jostle against one another, only the art of those times and places will be privileged that corresponds with dominant ideological paradigms. Such are the mechanisms that ensure the hierarchization of the events (histories) of certain locations above others. Unlike modernity, contemporaneity is both multiple and not multiple at the same time. Dominant cultures export and disseminate such temporal structures by means of the media of mass persuasion that run the gamut of newspapers, movies, television, and the internet. The time that matters, that on which the artistic canon depends, has always favored the cultures of the powerful. It may appear a contradiction to argue both that the decoupling of time from the idea of “art” in the context of the death of modernism has resulted in aesthetic confusion, *and* that the dominant centers of artistic production still dictate what counts as contemporary in contemporary art. Even if debate and disagreement currently characterize aesthetic thinking in the Euro-American context, this predicament by no means affects the decisive role of such cultures in the art market. If, within the context of increasing homogenization, market forces also serve to ensure a degree of variety in the artistic production of different cultures, does this mean that economic and cultural globalization work together in the promotion of original forms of aesthetic experience? The answer must be a resounding “no!” The imbalance of power that informs the relations between the industrial and post-industrial powers of the west and those of the rest of the world ensures that, even if creativity and imagination are the by-products of cultural interaction, non-western artistic production is rarely considered equal to that produced in Europe and the United States. In an incisive analysis of the encounter between the dominant art world of the west and contemporary artistic production in Africa, Salah Hassan writes:

It must however, be noted that the recent attentiveness by Western institutions to modern African art, and non-Western representation in general, has not, in any profound manner, altered the sense of inferiority with which those institutions have viewed the cultural production of those conveniently labelled ‘other.’ Nor does such attention represent a drastic change in Western institutional hegemonic strategies which continue to view, with deep distrust, cultural practices generated outside its immediate spheres of influence.<sup>10</sup>

According to Alain Quemin, who has undertaken a statistical survey:

...current globalization does not present any challenge whatsoever to the U.S. – European/U.S. – German duopoly, or even the U.S. hegemony in the international contemporary art world. All the theories being developed in this regard, in particular by art critics, cannot hide the following reality: both the market and the recognition accorded by art institutions remain the preserve of Western countries, and especially the richest few, i.e., the United States and Germany, as well as Switzerland and Great Britain to a lesser extent. Moreover the mar-

<sup>10</sup> Salah Hassan, “The Modernist Experience in African Art: Visual Expressions of the Self and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics,” in *Reading the Contemporary. African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* ed. Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1999), 215–235, 217.

<sup>11</sup> Alain Quemin, "The Illusion of the Elimination of Borders in the Contemporary Art World: The Role of the Different Countries in the 'Era of Globalization and Metissage,'" *Artwork Through the Market: The Past and the Present*, ed. Jan Bakos (Bratislava: Center for Contemporary Art, 2004), 275-300, 297-298.

<sup>12</sup> For recent discussions of the potential for a universal or global history of art, see David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003); John Onians, *Art, Culture and Nature: From Art History to World Art Studies* (London: Pindar Press, 2006); James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Zijlmans and van Damme, *World Art Studies*; David Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2008); Hans Belting "Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate," *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, Museums*, ed. Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 38-73; Jonathan Harris, ed., *Globalization and Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

ket – consisting of influential auction houses, fairs, and galleries – has in no way been allowed to get into the hands of any potential rivals and it remains concentrated mainly in Great Britain, Switzerland, and Germany, and particularly in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

What are the implications of such unequal power relations for historical narratives? Even if the historical record attempts to interlace the various narratives of global art in an effort to produce a richer tapestry of the past and the present, these threads will inevitably be woven together according to the idiosyncracies of a particular loom. The strands insisting on the "universal," standing out in silver and gold, will always draw attention away from the more quotidian colors of the "particular."<sup>12</sup> If the story of Sekoto's significance within South African art history is incommensurate with those told about art at the centers of power, then it is all too readily dismissed. If, however, that history can be related to the dominant one in such a way as to suggest the relativity of the latter, then the particular nature of both stories becomes evident. Has *The Short Century* forever changed the ways in which it is possible to tell the history of art in the twentieth century? I doubt it. Have the universalizing ambitions of art history, its status as a "grand narrative," been compromised in favor of a greater acceptance of the particular? Probably not. If temporal stories (histories), discreet, distinct, and possibly incommensurate accounts of the past can be told in ways that deny time a sense of necessity, then – and only then – will heterochronicity have a chance. ●