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EVEN MORE NEOLIBERAL ART HISTORY

GLOBALIZING ART HISTORY

CHARLES PALERMO

Anyone who's been paying attention for the past two decades has noticed that art history (just like the other humanities) has been furiously globalizing itself. From fighting Eurocentrism to tracing global networks of exchange, to acknowledging the incommensurability of multiple modernities, to challenging the category of art itself as an ideological mystification developed in modern Europe—which continues to reproduce power structures and to project them onto other cultures and peoples—turning global is a move with a lot of sponsorship, both intellectual and institutional. These different attacks on an art history variously understood as blinkered, racist or Eurocentric have been canonized by art historians and, more importantly, by university administrations. Which is a good thing in lots of ways. Departments are adding full-time positions in areas they had previously left untaught or had relied on adjuncts or other non-tenure-eligible faculty to teach.

But there's another side to this. Globalizing art history also subserves varieties of identity politics that are key tools of neoliberalism.

Historically, so-called non-Western art has been underserved in art history departments—or, what is worse, misrepresented. The aim of addressing historical inequalities typically takes as its goal a redistribution of wealth or representation that undoes those historical inequalities. But, in the case of calls to address disparities in the distribution of wealth among the members of various ascriptive categories, this is a call to make the operations of the market fairer in pointed contrast to imagining or producing a distribution of wealth that is more equal or a distribution that is not determined by a market. In the case of calls to address disparities of representation, even less is accomplished—not even wealth inequality is on the table. In either case, what's at stake is *at best* making neoliberalism fairer. At worst, the aim is just to make its cultural production look more diverse. Either way, the effect is to *justify* inequality rather than to eliminate it. The neoliberal party within the university, and within art history specifically, is committed to this disparitarian politics.¹

There's a reason why social justice is a paramount consideration in the appointment of your next named chair, while it is uncouth to mention social justice apropos of adjuncts or custodial contractors. The preferred species of social justice plays a real role in disappearing the other. And globalizing is a version of this maneuver.

So, what does the globalizing maneuver look like, and how does it work?

In a recent essay on art history as a taught subject, Claire Farago identifies “two urgent questions facing the humanities today”: One is the “increasingly corporate university's administrative charge to offer majors that have occupational value” (115).² Art history pays its way, occupational-value-wise, because of “the museum and related institutions and practices, chiefly the infotainment industry” (115). Farago cites the introduction she wrote with Donald Preziosi to a volume of essays, in which they argued that museums play a special role in “the fabrication and perpetuation of our conception of ourselves as autonomous individuals with unique subjectivities” (127-28n2). The museum holds a special place among society's “ideological apparatuses” (128n2). So, on Farago's view, as art historians, we're reproducing ourselves as labor for the corporate university and museum-infotainment-complex, in order to support an ideological state apparatus that holds a special place in producing

subjects (following Althusser, agents with the freedom to make choices and also a sense of their own subjection to the state³). The first of the imperatives Farago names indicates that it is not her purpose to resist the system that reproduces its workers in new subjects. “What matters crucially are the values that we instill along with the subject matter” (115). Hence the other urgent imperative: we “need to rethink how we teach at the introductory level” (115). Althusser praises certain brave and clear-eyed teachers for bucking their role in producing subjects for capitalism; Farago, on the other hand, wants us to produce subjects with good values (“Ideology,” 252). In our view, her plan is well suited to do precisely that—to produce subjects for capitalism who are fully trained by the relevant ISA to savor the ethical weight of the choices they can feel themselves making when they think about other peoples. This is the politics of representation at work. The reference to Althusser just makes its complicity with capitalism rise to visibility.

Is this just Farago’s peculiar self-incriminating mention of Althusser? What Farago has done by treating art history as an ISA and by indicating that globalizing it is a feature, not a bug, of the art history ISA’s program is to offer a surprisingly apt diagnosis of the whole impulse to globalizing art history. So let’s look further and consider the political function of global art history, taking Farago’s generally reliable and compact diagnosis of it as our guide.

To make a concise story short, a few issues underlie Farago’s account. First, “the history of art has no *a priori* object domain” (120). That is to say, it’s not clear which objects are our business and what narratives will emerge from the choice of objects we make. The category of art and the categories that support our organization of its history (“nation-states, continents, religions, period styles, and other such monolithic entities” [121]) are neither innocent nor adequate. Secondly, history, which we understand to be “a dynamic process that flows in-between, outside, intersects with, and otherwise does not conform to our inherited subdisciplinary categories,” requires a rethinking of those categories (120). Finally, as a corollary of the first two, “truth” must be understood “as something to be negotiated, to be debated, something that remains relative and particular, rather than fixed and universal” (120-21), something “tied to concrete situations and subject positions” (121).

The first issue implies something as simple as overthrowing “our inherited nineteenth-century categories” (124)—such as “Art”—and teaching “all forms of cultural production,” including “song and dance, poetry, music, storytelling” (122). This turn to cultural studies is, in a certain sense, old news. We all range freely over fields of cultural production and practice. If the twentieth century taught us anything it is that, ontologically, art status is cheap. Anyone can secure it for nearly any artifact or practice, including “song and dance, poetry, music, storytelling”; indeed, art is a part of ordinary life and has been for a long time. Of course, there are significant achievements in the various arts, which one may celebrate with praise and study. In order to make art sinister, we have to transform it. Then we call it fine art. Such art is made by geniuses, commissioned by kings, discussed by an exclusive cadre of specialists, and is by its nature ideologically saturated with notions of genius, political hierarchy, and Eurocentrism, according to a certain well worn line of reasoning, so we call it “fine art” or just “Art.” But that’s not where the real force of Farago’s argument lies, and that sleight of hand is another topic. To see the real thrust of problematizing the category of art (Art), we have to see how it articulates with the other issues she raises.

So, unsurprisingly, something similar occurs with the second issue: “Considering the global trading network established in the sixteenth century in a longer historical context effectively decenters the dominant role attributed to Europe in the era of colonialism” (124). The early modern world’s story is not the story of Europe, so discourse should “embrace[] the challenge to theorize about the complexities of cultural interaction without imposing ethnocentric categories such as those that historically define the discipline on Euro-American terms” (122). Again, there is nothing shocking here; furthermore, nothing incompatible with the practice of art history as we all know it. One can imagine an art historian working on artifacts outside modern European discourse wanting to use concepts and categories the makers of those artifacts used. One of the good results of the recent move toward global art history is an increase in the number of such specialists and commensurate progress in those fields of study. Will the department’s specialist in early modern Europe really insist, against protests of their irrelevance, that the new specialist in South Asian art produce a set of stylistic categories supported by periodizations and national schools?

But to see it that way would be to miss the point again. Farago is clear up front: what we do is political. That, of course, has been the premise of this discussion of Farago's essay. But how does Farago understand her politics? According to Farago, citing Giorgio Agamben, politics "will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity)." ⁴ Agamben is pointing to Tiananmen Square—an infamous clash between protesters and the state, in which, according to Agamben, the protesters distinguished their protest by "the relative absence of determinate contents in their demands" ("Tiananmen," 68). Agamben takes this to be the new mode of politics, which will oppose itself to the state—the power of individuals to "form a community without affirming an identity" ("Tiananmen," 87). This might explain why our role in this struggle is to overcome and to alert our students to the visual rhetorical strategies that allowed Donald Trump to mislead and deceive the American public, to make them complicit in his program of racist xenophobia (118). This belonging without identity would oppose racism and xenophobia, which pit members of one identity against members of another. And this seems to be a welcome alternative to multiculturalism, which opposes racism and xenophobia and their hypostatization of ethnicity as fundamentally mistaken only to respond with a demand that ethnicity be hypostatized more affirmatively. By eschewing identity in favor of belonging as such, Agamben (and Farago) transcend identity politics by replacing identities with subjects.

This approach retains the salutary antiracism of traditional identity politics while continuing to neglect class politics. A protest without demands is not a protest against capitalism. Farago's proposal, then, is to recognize (correctly) the racist and xenophobic dimensions of Trumpism (and of right-wing politics of the recent past), but to implicitly ignore the equally (or more) central place of its neoliberal economic policies. This is, like the "relative absence of determinate contents" that marked the demands of the Tiananmen protestors, a politics without political objectives. In a world wracked by the depredations of capitalism, is a "relative absence of determinate contents" the right model for our political agenda? No.

Again: is this Farago's politics, or is this something in the DNA of global art history? Insofar as globalization concerns itself with "subject positions," it seems clear that struggles for state power and deep changes to the relations of production and the exploitation of

labor are not just beyond its grasp but irrelevant to it. How is this antipathy to class politics inherent in Farago's approach?

The key move here is Farago's shift from truth as "fixed and universal" toward a notion of truth as based on "subject positions" (121). Accordingly, "the same object or concrete manifestation can have multiple meanings for its users," a point Farago takes to be "timely" precisely because awareness that "works of art and other cultural artifacts that art historians study are irreducibly multivalent [...] can enable individuals with different beliefs to coexist in the same heterogeneous society" (125). Objects mean different things, according to Farago, to different people. Learning that cultural artifacts mean what their various users take them to mean is inherent in Farago's politics, according to which heterogeneous humanity organizes itself around its heterogeneity and does so in pointed disregard for the variety of its unreconciled "different beliefs."

This move is familiar. And not just because Trump and people like him insist that other people (whatever that means) are irreducibly different from us (whatever that means). Even when a right-thinking liberal like Farago does it, replacing meaning with identity and disagreement with difference is a profoundly ideological tendency and one that is fundamental to recent history's nearly invisible acquiescence to neoliberalism. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the notion that we have no universal issues (history) to debate, but have instead separate experiences (histories) to recognize, has meant the displacement of objective issues such as exploitation by subjective concerns like recognition.

So this is how Farago's argument works. And this is the inevitable logic of globalization as a cause in the humanities. The status of the work of art is called into question. This takes a particular form. Rather than recognizing the ontological generosity of the category of art, the argument demands a critique of the category as such. With that questioning comes a critique of the very notion of categories as a universalist legacy of European domination; rather than turn to a historicism that multiplies contexts, discourses, and therefore categories, the argument requires that meaning be relativized, freed from contexts, discourses, and categories altogether. This entails a suspension of truth claims, so that subject position displaces meaning (not what something means to me, or means to someone), and difference trumps disagreement. So we arrive at a politics of subject positions as against a politics of class. We stand before the state's tanks without an analysis of history

or of exploitation; without solidarity grounded in demands. Who could ask for a better subject?

NOTES

¹ For more on these issues, see *nonsite.org* 23 “Naturalizing Class Relations,” led by Kenneth Warren’s “Tain’t So.” <https://nonsite.org/issues/issue-23-naturalizing-class-relations>

² Claire Farago, “Imagining Art History Otherwise,” in Jane Chin Davidson and Sandra Esslinger, eds., *Global and World Art in the Practice of the University Museum* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 115-30; here citing 115.

³ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation),” trans. Ben Brewster, appendix two in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, pref. Etienne Balibar, intro. Jacques Bidet, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014), 232-272, specifically 269; translation originally published in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971).

⁴ “Imagining,” 118; quoting Giorgio Agamben, “Tiananmen” in *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 86.

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