

## Provincializing New York: In and Out of the Geopolitics of Art After 1945

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### Recommended Citation

Joyeux-Prunel, Béatrice. "Provincializing New York: In and Out of the Geopolitics of Art After 1945." *Artl@s Bulletin* 10, no. 1 (2021): Article 12.

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### Cover Page Footnote

This paper is the extended version of a keynote talk given at the university of St Andrews at the Conference 'In and Out of American Art: Between Provincialism and Transnationalism, 1940-1980' on the 27th and 28th of October, 2017. It presents in part the results of an approach such as the Artl@s project (<https://artlas.huma-num.fr>), which aims to internationalise our sources and decentralise our stories by crossing traditional approaches and digital multiscale methodologies. I thank the people who read and discussed this text with me, especially Sam Rose and Alistair Rider, Catherine Dossin, Celia White, and James Horton for his editorial and critical work. The text summarizes some of the ideas presented in my latest book: *Naissance de l'art contemporain 1945-1970. Une histoire mondiale* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2021). I am also very grateful to Simon Gabay who taught me how to make animated maps for this article.

# Provincializing New York: In and Out of the Geopolitics of Art After 1945

Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel

## Abstract

In this article, I argue that the putative global centrality of New York in art after 1945 is a construct, as it is for Paris prior to 1945. Monographs and national approaches are unsuccessful in challenging such powerful myths as these. A global, transnational and comparative approach demonstrates that the struggle for centrality was a global phenomenon after 1945, a battle that New York does not win (depending on one's point of view) until after 1964. Rather than considering centres and peripheries as a fixed category, I propose to consider them as a strategic notion which artists and their promoters have always sought to manipulate according to their own ends.

## Résumé

La centralité mondiale supposée de New York dans l'art après 1945 est une construction, comme celle de Paris avant 1945. Les monographies et les approches nationales sont incapables de remettre en question des mythes aussi puissants. Une approche globale, transnationale et comparative montre que la lutte pour la centralité est un phénomène mondial après 1945, une bataille que New York ne gagne (selon les points de vue) qu'après 1964. Plutôt que de considérer les centres et les périphéries comme une catégorie fixe, je propose de les aborder comme une notion stratégique que les artistes et leurs promoteurs ont toujours cherché à manipuler en fonction de leurs propres fins.

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In a 1974 article in *Artforum*, Terry Smith bemoaned what he called the “Provincialism Problem” of art in Australia, and more generally of contemporary art around the world.<sup>1</sup> In this oft-quoted article, Smith argued that the New York-dominated global art system condemned artists elsewhere to perceive themselves and their art as inferior, at best an epigone of what was being produced in New York. Smith called for broad changes to the worldwide art system that would make room for subordinate practices: re-imagining the relationships between centres and peripheries, he suggested, would help to make room for more open and equitable modalities of contemporary creation. As Heather Barker and Charles Green have shown, Smith’s membership of the Art & Language group decisively influenced the position that he set out in this article.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, we can consider that the text formed part of a wider strategy deployed by Art & Language, a group which first emerged on the international art scene in 1968, that consisted in the adoption of a peripheral position as a means of affirming its avant-garde credentials. At the time, rejecting New York was very much the fashionable thing for artists to do – even those in New York’s conceptual art circles. Smith’s article is nonetheless regularly quoted by critics and historians seeking to assess whether or not the situation has improved or to determine the extent to which the globalized world of contemporary art has been able to accommodate peripheries.<sup>3</sup>

Yet these debates have a major blind spot, namely their lack of examination of the conditions of possibility of New York’s supposed centrality, or in other words, the history of this historical construction. The genealogy of the ‘triumph of New York after 1945’

has barely been traced, whereas this myth – for it is a myth, as powerful as the myth of Parisian centrality prior to 1945 – has long predetermined the majority of discourses on art in America and beyond. The idea of New York’s centrality is the conceptual underpinning that makes possible the ‘provincialism’ that Terry Smith denounced in 1974. This provincialism is still being discussed today, with art history now having perpetuated the notion of the peripheries’ subordination or insubordination for several generations.

In this article, I argue that the historiographical idea of New York’s centrality must be deconstructed in just as the centrality of Paris prior to 1945 should have been questioned.<sup>4</sup> I contend that as long as art history relies upon its traditional methods – namely case-by-case monographs and national (at times nationalist) approaches – it will be incapable of challenging such powerful myths as these. With this in mind, I will propose here the foundations of a global, transnational and comparative approach to the question of centrality. This approach reveals that the struggle for artistic centrality after 1945 was not a transatlantic phenomenon but rather a global one, with no clear winner emerging until the 1960s. Indeed, New York can only be said to have emerged victorious after 1964, and even then, it was to be a partial victory. Rather than considering centres and peripheries as a fixed category, this study invites us to consider it as a strategic issue, one which artists and their promoters have always sought to manipulate according to their own ends. More generally, I aim to encourage a rethinking of the ways in which we perceive space and time in art history, whilst reminding to be wary of the effects of a historicist and compartmentalized approach to world cultural history.

## New York as the Global Centre of Modernism After 1945: The Makings of an Art Historical Myth

There is a broad consensus amongst art historians that the USA has dominated global art since the

<sup>1</sup> This paper is the extended version of a keynote talk given at the university of St Andrews at the Conference ‘In and Out of American Art: Between Provincialism and Transnationalism, 1940-1980’ on the 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of October, 2017. It presents in part the results of an approach such as the Artl@s project (<https://artlas.huma-num.fr>), which aims to internationalise our sources and decentralise our stories by crossing traditional approaches and digital multiscale methodologies. I thank the people who read and discussed this text with me, especially Sam Rose and Alistair Rider, Catherine Dossin, Celia White, and James Horton for his editorial and critical work. The text summarizes some of the ideas presented in my latest book: *Naissance de l’art contemporain 1945-1970. Une histoire mondiale* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2021). I am also very grateful to Simon Gabay who taught me how to make animated maps for this article.

Terry Smith, “The Provincialism Problem”, *Artforum*, Sept. 1974, 54–9.

<sup>2</sup> Heather Barker and Charles Green, “The Provincialism Problem: Terry Smith and Centre-Periphery Art History”, *Journal of Art Historiography*, 2, 20.

<sup>3</sup> See Terry Smith’s own assessment, “The Provincialism Problem: Then and Now”, *ARTMargins*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, February 2017, 6-32.

<sup>4</sup> Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, “Provincializing Paris. The Center-Periphery Narrative of Modern Art in Light of Quantitative and Transnational Approaches.” *Artl@s Bulletin* 4, no. 1 (2015): Article 4. <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol4/iss1/4/>.

1940s. It is also widely accepted that from 1945 onwards New York became the citadel of artistic modernism, as embodied by Abstract Expressionism, while Europe in general and Paris in particular were doomed to flounder in cultural irrelevance.<sup>5</sup> The unanimous confirmation of this new world order came, we are told, with the attribution of the *Gran Premio* to Robert Rauschenberg at the Venice Biennale in 1964. Despite the considerable progress in postcolonial approaches to art history over the past dozen years, which have done much to challenge notions of “American” (US) superiority, this overarching narrative has remained largely intact. Why is this?

A myth spreads through the circulation of books, pictures, and ideas. The historiography on the art of the United States affirms time and again the ‘triumph of American art’ after 1945. Broadly speaking, there are two explanations for this putative dominance in the global geopolitics of art. The first supposes that ‘American art’ possesses some enviable quintessence that allowed it to be more expressive than art from other regions after 1945 (or even after 1914 according to some).<sup>6</sup> In this reading, New York Abstract Expressionism as embodied by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and their generation represents the pinnacle of the avant-garde. The writings of the New York critic Clement Greenberg promoted the idea of a post-1945 victory as early as 1948;<sup>7</sup> Greenberg’s thesis was later reiterated by his colleague Irving Sandler in his 1977 book *The Triumph of American Painting* (Fig.1).<sup>8</sup>

This point of view first developed in the very small New York avant-garde milieu of the 1940s, before spreading across the United States as a whole in the late 1950s. It became international in the 1970s: rendered irrelevant by the success of pop and conceptual art, the New York critics responsible for the

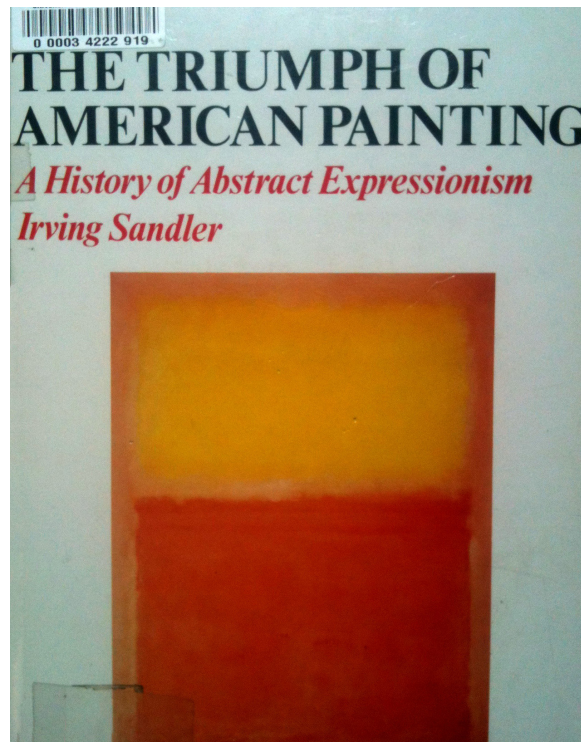


Figure 1. Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Westview Press, 1977)

glorification of Abstract Expressionism in 1940s and 1950s wrote their own history and placed themselves at the centre. Meanwhile, European art historians were enthralled by the dynamism of the New York market and succumbed to a continent-wide cultural inferiority complex.<sup>9</sup> The two historiographical threads converged in the late 1990s, when Europeans began to discover the history of American art as refracted through the legend of Clement Greenberg, whose assertive proclamations confirmed what was now a long-standing sense of inferiority. Though it is mired in methodological nationalism and formalism, this historiographical structure remains influential to this day.<sup>10</sup>

A second explanation for the ‘triumph of American art’ is more intrinsic to North America, and dates back to the protest against the Vietnam War.<sup>11</sup> This revisionist explanation began with Eva Cockcroft’s

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Westview Press, 1977), and Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> The philosopher Arthur Danto even traces the international domination of ‘American art’ back to 1914: Arthur Danto, ‘Philosophizing American Art’, in Christos M. Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal (ed), *American Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture, 1913-1993* (Berlin: Prestel, 1993), 21-38.

<sup>7</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘The Decline of cubism’, *Partisan Review*, vol. 15, no. 3 (1948), 369.

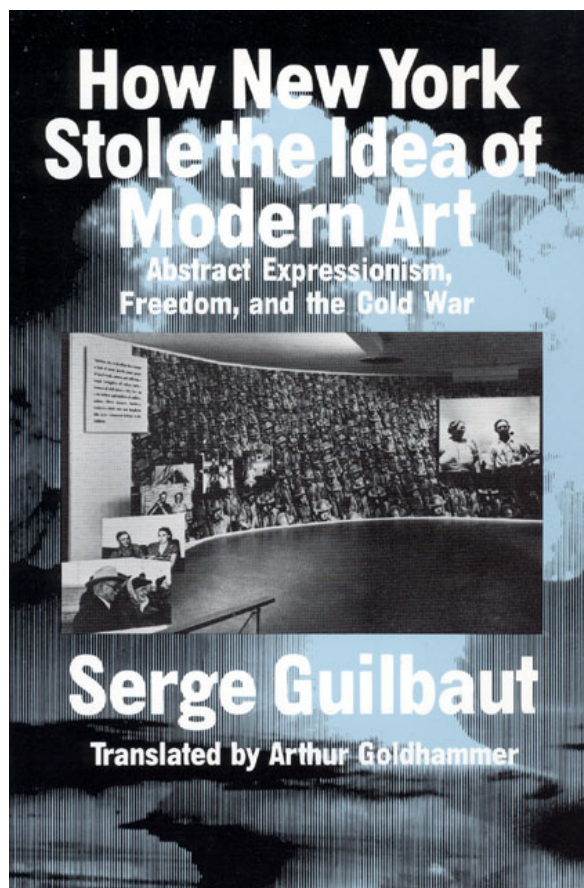
<sup>8</sup> Irving Sandler, *The triumph of American painting*. Same thesis in Dore Ashton, *The New York School*.

<sup>9</sup> For example: *Paris-New York 1908-1968*, exhibition catalogue Paris, Centre Pompidou, 1977.

<sup>10</sup> David Peters Corbett, ‘Painting American frontiers: “encounter” and the borders of American identity in nineteenth-century art’, *Perspective. La revue de l’INHA*, 2013, 1, 129-152.

<sup>11</sup> Eva Cockcroft, ‘Abstract Expressionism. Weapon of the Cold War’, *Artforum*, vol. 15, no. 10 (June 1974), 39-41.





**Figure 2.** Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

study of the CIA's use of Abstract Expressionism in the Cold War. Serge Guilbaut's book *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (originally a PhD dissertation defended in Canada, Fig. 2) has since popularized the hypothesis that MoMA's international exhibition program was the key organ of this propaganda effort, financed by an economic and political elite determined to impose the dominance of the United States and its model of economic liberalism.<sup>12</sup> Though this historiographical vein has considerably renewed art historical narratives, it has left unquestioned the notion of Abstract Expressionism's superiority. Similarly, it has neglected to interrogate the chronology of New York's rise to dominance, and indeed the accuracy of this claim to dominance. This reading raises

<sup>12</sup> Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

further unanswered questions. How can the supposedly decisive influence of US philanthropists on the postwar US propaganda effort - which began in earnest only in 1952 - be reconciled with the idea that "American art" was dominant as early as 1945? How effective was this propaganda, and how did its effectiveness vary from country to country?

As a result, the idea of New York's dominance after 1945 has gone largely unchallenged. Today, this narrative continues to appear indisputable despite the fragility revealed by even a summary review of existing historiography. Introductory texts to exhibitions about art after 1945 thus usually begin with some variation on the notion of "the shift of avant-garde development from Europe to America" - this example from the Guggenheim website<sup>13</sup> - as if such assertions were self-evident truths. Academic teaching and higher education also play their part in the perpetuation of this myth. In January 2020, a cursory survey of courses in North America on 'Art since 1945' or 'Global Art since 1945' available online reveals a surprising - or perhaps unsurprising - uniformity: programs almost unfailingly begin with Abstract Expressionism in the United States, as if it were unthinkable to start with anything else, let alone anywhere else.<sup>14</sup> At Portland Community College, the 2019-2020 course 'Art since 1945' promises "focused attention on American [*sic* for US] art, as World War II ended the supremacy of Europe in the visual art world".<sup>15</sup> Even a course at so prominent institution as NYU entitled 'History of Art Since 1945: Questioning Modernism' contains the following assertion: "The influence of centres like Paris, Berlin, and Moscow was disrupted by the events of World War II, after which New York City became the hub of an increasingly global art world".<sup>16</sup> On Rice University's website, we similarly

<sup>13</sup> *Art since 1945: Developments, Diversity, and Dialogue*, exhibition, Guggenheim Bilbao, November 16, 2004-January 30, 2005. Still online on January 17, 2020 <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/art-since-1945-developments-diversity-and-dialogue>.

<sup>14</sup> For example: Grinnell College ([https://catalog.grinnell.edu/preview\\_course\\_nopop.php?catoid=20&coid=43881](https://catalog.grinnell.edu/preview_course_nopop.php?catoid=20&coid=43881)); Duke university (<https://gendersexualityfeminist.duke.edu/courses/global-art-1945/>).

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.pcc.edu/schedule/default.cfm?fa=dspCourse2&thisTerm=202001&frmType=DL&topicCode=ART&subtopicCode=%20&crsCode=ART213&subjCode=ART&crsNum=213>, accessed 17 January 2020.

<sup>16</sup> NYU 2014 Course "History of Art Since 1945. Questioning Modernism", [https://www.academia.edu/8198387/Art\\_Since\\_1945\\_Questioning\\_Modernism](https://www.academia.edu/8198387/Art_Since_1945_Questioning_Modernism). Accessed 17 January 2020.

discover a course which “introduces the major developments, figures, and works of late modernism beginning with the shift, during the 1940s, from Paris to New York as the cultural centre of avant-garde” and which “charts the rise of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 50s and follows its divided legacies in the 1960s and 70s.”<sup>17</sup> As these examples suggest, courses entitled ‘Art History since 1945’ appear to have an unacknowledged – and sometimes exclusive – focus on the history of art of the USA.

As keen as some art historians may be to challenge this narrative, they seem to have serious difficulty in altering it – even in Europe. “To date,” wrote German curator Peter Weibel in his introduction to the exhibition *Kunst in Europa 1945-1968* held in 2016-2017 at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, “the attention of historiography was largely focussed on Abstract Expressionism as a symbolisation of the free West, while the socialist realism embodied the conservatism of the Communist East. But today, we know that this dominant model of art history was a product of the Cold War”.<sup>18</sup> However, Weibel’s own attempts to relativize and question “the dominant model” remained limited to thematic aesthetic narratives, as if to sidestep questions of geopolitical and cultural dominance. When it comes to studying art in Latin America after 1945, art historians tend to take US dominance for granted, as if it were attested to (albeit negatively) by the marked animosity of South American avant-garde groups towards US art in the 1960s. This is not to mention other parts of the world, for which art historians often delineate separate continental or national narratives, attributing to each entity an independent history of its own.<sup>19</sup> Is international comparison to be avoided at all costs? For now, those attempting to

tackle New York’s ostensible dominance after 1945 seem to be fighting a losing battle in much the same way as those who seek to challenge the pre-1945 artistic centrality of Paris.

As deeply entrenched as these narratives of the centrality of New York and the US after 1945 or of Paris and France before 1945 may be, historians have rarely sought to verify them by looking to sources produced outside of these two putative centres; this is particularly true for New York. But how can we assert the global dominance of a city without studying the way in which it is perceived throughout the world – the whole world? There is a dearth of real comparative studies on the global geopolitics of art after 1945, especially for the period 1945-1965. In light of this, a critical evaluation of the way in which the art world has negotiated US centrality in the arts since the 1940s is imperative.

### Art History’s Methodologies and the “Provincialism Problem”

What is at the root of the “provincialism problem”? As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, it is a problem of historicism, an attitude that leads to the perception that some are in the “now” while others are in the “not yet”.<sup>20</sup> We can accept that the world is comprised of various non-synchronous temporalities, and that the apparent non-simultaneity of artistic approaches does not imply a hierarchy in terms of progress.<sup>21</sup> But even this more nuanced temporal approach to space is also often the result of a compartmentalized way of working, that of a blinkered art history focused on small case studies that are foregrounded as exceptional and superior without examining the conditions of international influence.

Narratives vary according to how we define, or choose not to define, commonly used but under-discussed notions: innovation, advancedness/belatedness, centre and periphery, diffusion, domination, influence, nationality, or even, ‘America’.

<sup>17</sup> <https://arthistory.rice.edu/courses/201920/26071>. Accessed 17 January 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Exhibition Online Presentation : <https://zkm.de/en/exhibition/2016/10/art-in-europe-1945-1968>. See also Peter Weibel (ed.), *Kunst in Europa 1945-1968. Die Kunstentwicklung in Europa nach 1945. Ein neues Narrativ in zehn Phasen. The Development of Art in Europe after 1945. A New Narrative in Ten Phases*. Exhibition catalogue, Karlsruhe, Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, 22.10.2016-29-1.2017. Exhibition texts online, [http://zkm.de/media/file/en/art\\_in\\_europe\\_1945-1968.pdf](http://zkm.de/media/file/en/art_in_europe_1945-1968.pdf); accessed 17 January 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Two examples (of excellent projects other hand): Mathilde Arnoux (ed.), *OwnReality. À chacun son réel. La notion de réel dans les arts plastiques en France, RFA, RDA et Pologne entre 1960 et 1989*, funded by the European Research Council and hosted by the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte. <https://dfk-paris.org/fr/ownreality>; and Catherine Dossin (ed.), *France and the Visual Arts since 1945. Remapping European Postwar and Contemporary Art* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, US: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Christophe Charle, *Discordance des temps, une brève histoire de la modernité* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011).

After all, could ‘the triumph of American art’ not be the triumph ‘of Mexican art’, or just as well ‘of Canadian art’? Narratives also vary according to the methods and sources we work with. The centre-periphery approach is based on widespread but ultimately dubious habits: working monographically, that is to say working on case studies, on singular artists who risk being considered exceptional simply because we know and like them, at the expense of ‘the big picture’; confusing art history and hagiography (the history of saints), with artists portrayed as always independent, free from any economic interests, etc.; assigning nationalities to works of art (we readily speak of ‘American art’, ‘French art’, but is Pollock really an embodiment of ‘American art’, and would Picasso be a condensation of ‘French art’, or indeed of ‘Spanish art?’); ethnocentrism, which sees us work all too often on the same ‘centres’ – those which we know best – as if nothing noteworthy had happened anywhere else; evolutionist formalism that focuses on forms, their power and their agency, to the detriment of their social, political and economic contexts. All these methodologies betray a surprising cultural myopia, a perspective which seems to be incapable of comprehending what is happening elsewhere, and instead (mis)takes its immediate surroundings or objects of study for the most important ones in the world.

Many otherwise excellent historians have failed to question, or perhaps even to notice, this myopia. A striking example comes in the uncritical success of Serge Guilbaut’s book, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.<sup>22</sup> How did Guilbaut construct his study? The book begins with a 1948 proclamation by Clement Greenberg in which the critic trumpeted the USA’s global artistic triumph, courtesy of Abstract Expressionism. But Clement Greenberg knew little to nothing of what was going on beyond New York’s city limits at that time.<sup>23</sup> Guilbaut does

not cast a wider net for his sources, 95% or so of which originate from New York – that is to say the sources available to Greenberg at the time –, while the rest come from Paris – that is to say, sources that would make their way to Greenberg only after 1951-1952, when the transnational circulation of journals and exhibitions resumed in earnest. Moreover, Guilbaut’s French sources are unfailingly those simmering with Gallic animosity towards the USA, an animosity which Guilbaut puts down to cultural and artistic jealousy and a French inferiority complex; in reality, the political, communist-inflected anti-US inclinations of the actors quoted by Guilbaut bear deeper consideration.

Above all, how can we speak of global dominance without paying attention to art beyond Paris and New York? A tale of two cities cannot summarize the global history of modernism and its geopolitics. The binary narrative organised around centre versus periphery enacts a real symbolic violence against the latter regions, which are deemed unworthy of study; it erases the memory of figures who were not lucky enough to belong to the small groups selected by the canon – perhaps 99.9% of all artists. In this respect, we can apply to art history Franco Moretti’s criticisms of literature studies and their inability to account for anything more than an infinitesimal proportion of the world’s literary production or to go beyond monography and formalism.<sup>24</sup> If art historians do not make space for historical complexity in their own domain of expertise, who else will? We might also object to the terminological sleight of hand that substitutes the production of a few circles of artists largely based in New York for ‘American Art’ as a whole.

Decolonial thinkers, in the wake of Latin American Liberation philosophies, stress that decolonization processes are far from finished and that colonial structures persist in our ways of thinking.<sup>25</sup> They

<sup>22</sup> Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.

<sup>23</sup> On this chapter, see my clarification on the foreign journals and works that circulated to the USA until the mid-1950s: Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, ‘Internationalization through the Lens: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Art Periodicals and Decentred Circulation’, *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, Vol. 4, no. 2, 2019: Periodicals In-Between/Les Périodiques comme médiateurs, 48-69 (precisely, pages 63-65); URL: <https://ojs.ugent.be/jeps/article/view/14902/13399>.

<sup>24</sup> See Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on world literature’, *New Left Review*, no.1, 2000, <https://newleftreview.org/11/1/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature> (accessed 18 January 2019).

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ‘Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges’, *Eurozine*, 29 June 2007: <https://www.eurozine.com/beyond-abyssal-thinking/>



call for ‘cognitive justice’ and demand that we recognize and value texts and cultural practices that come from outside our established criteria, habits, and practices. Clearly choosing the terms we use to name our research objects is a means of contributing to this cognitive justice. A decolonization of our way of selecting sources and of analysing them could also be possible, and would result in decentred and more historically complex narratives. Here, I will outline the first results of an approach which combines global, circulatory, and local scales, and that looks at peripheral perspectives on the global geopolitics of art. This perspective – which the Artl@s Project has been illustrating since many years – compares and geolocalizes, measures, and charts objects of study at a global level. It begins with a ‘distant reading’ of sources, that is to say one which uses computational methods of analysis for large collections of sources, rather than with a close study that runs the risk of lending an out-sized importance to its own epistemologies – let’s call this epistemic self-survalorization -, and which cannot resist the challenge presented by the rise of generality.<sup>26</sup> This approach is comparative in that it contrasts different points of view about ‘artistic centrality’ in different parts of the globe. It is transnational, in that it looks at the actual circulation of artworks, of artistic information, of artists, as well as examining the routes and geographies sketched out by these circulations. It analyses the works and texts themselves and moves on to case studies only after these preliminary steps, comparing them with the results of the initial distant, comparative and transnational approach.<sup>27</sup> The conclusions that can be drawn as to the place of the art of the USA in the international art world after 1945 present a striking contrast to the traditional narrative of New York’s global dominance of modern art, as well as relativizing Paris’ so-called dominance prior to 1945.

<sup>26</sup> On ‘distant reading’, see Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London/New-York: Verso, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> This ‘distant reading’ of the history of art is one I employ in my three volumes that propose an alternative global and social history of artistic modernities. See Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Les avant-gardes artistiques. Une histoire transnationale*. Vol. 1 1848-1918 (Paris : Gallimard, 2016), Vol. 2 1918-1945 (Paris : Gallimard, 2017); and *Naissance de l’art contemporain 1945-1970. Une histoire mondiale*.

## Biennial, Museum, and Avant-Garde in the 1950s: From the Metropolis to the ‘Global Cultural Centre’

A comparative perspective reveals that the 1950s should not be considered as the decade of the triumph of US culture, but as an era in which all was still to play for on the global cultural stage. During this period there was undeniably a challenge to European hegemony in general, and to Paris’ cultural reputation in particular; a challenge precipitated in large part by the sins of the European continent over the course of the Second World War. But the pretenders to this much coveted dominance were many and came from around the globe. From Japan to South America, private and governmental actors alike threw in their lot, seeking to use artistic and cultural channels to obtain a prime position on the world stage – a position which could help to tip the diplomatic and economic scales in their favour. The economic and military might of the United States, imposing as it was, was insufficient to altogether thwart the cultural hopes of rival countries.

Even before the end of the Second World War, the Mexican elite, for instance, were aware of the stakes to come. A report by the *Sociedad de Arte Moderno*, which was founded in 1944 in Mexico City to promote cultural activities in the capital, contained the following lines:

The extinction of the traditional artistic centres of Europe has created for Mexico – a nation which possesses a great artistic vitality and personality, and whose reputation has already been bolstered by the plastic arts the world over – the obligation to assume as its duty the task of protecting and encouraging art by transforming itself into a global cultural centre.<sup>28</sup>

Mexico had benefited from international business during the conflict, notably thanks to the oil industry, which had been overseen by President Lázaro Cárdenas since the nationalization of the

<sup>28</sup> ‘Correspondencia personal’, *Folleto de la Sociedad de Arte Moderno*, Mexico 1944, quoted by Adriana Orozco, ‘Les expositions d’art mexicain dans l’espace transnational: circulations, médiations et réceptions (1938-1952-2000)’, unpublished doctoral dissertation (Université de Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle: 2016), 165.

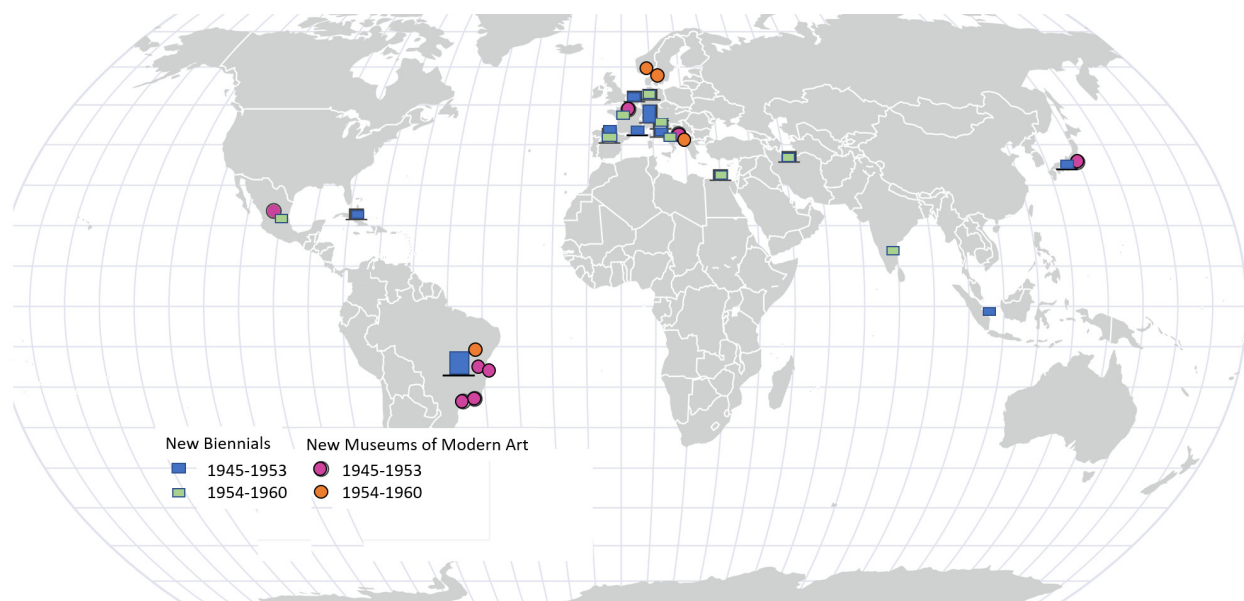


Figure 3. New Biennials and Museums of Modern Art, 1945-1960

country's oil resources in 1938 at the expense of US companies.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, it was in Mexico that many opponents of fascism had taken refuge since the Spanish Civil War. In 1945, Mexico was on the 'good' side of global geopolitics, squarely in the antifascist camp. Its global political stature called for a cultural counterpart, which could build on the worldwide resonance enjoyed by Mexican muralism in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>30</sup>

The ambition to "transform [one]self into a global cultural center" was common to many nations during this period: in Western Germany after 1949, in the cultural debates in Japan in 1950-1952, in Argentina after 1955 and the fall of Juan Perón, as

well as in some countries which decided to pursue a 'third way' between capitalism and socialism, liberalism and communism, such as Yugoslavia, Egypt, or Indonesia. Numerous capital cities threw themselves into the race, spurred on by the various political agendas of their nations. To this end, they opened museums of modern art: Dubrovnik in 1945 for the new communist state of Yugoslavia, Paris in 1947 (which sought to forget with its 1947 inauguration the uncomfortable fact that the museum had been created under the Vichy regime), for São Paulo in 1947 (MAM-SP, Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo) and Rio de Janeiro in 1948,<sup>31</sup> Tokyo and Madrid in 1952, Zagreb in 1954, Buenos Aires in 1956-1957, followed in 1958 by the Louisiana Museum, north of Copenhagen, and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm (Fig. 3).

Other existing museums enlarged their buildings during this period.<sup>32</sup> When the funds for a museum were not available, as was the case in many secondary capitals, the elite could establish biennials, which triggered what Anthony Gardner and Charles

<sup>29</sup> See *Latin America during World War II*. Edited by Thomas M. Leonard and John F. Bratzel (Lanham MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> On the influence of Mexican muralists in the United States, see Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: Univ of New Mexico Press, 1989), and Anna Indych-López, *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). For Russia: William Richardson, "The Dilemmas of a Communist Artist: Diego Rivera in Moscow, 1927-1928", *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, vol. 3, no. 1 Winter 1987, 49-69. For Southern America see Jacques Poloni-Simard, "Le muralisme des années 1930 et 1940 dans les pays du Río de la Plata", *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*. URL : <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/66328>; Alejandro Anreus, "Siqueiros' Travels and 'Alternative Muralisms' in Argentina and Cuba", in Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait and Robin Adèle Greeley (ed.), *Mexican Muralism. A critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), chap. 9. On the European reception of Mexican muralism, see Adriana Ortega Orozco, "Les Expositions d'art mexicain dans l'espace transnational. Circulations, médiations et réceptions (1938-1952-2000)", unpublished doctoral dissertation, université de Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2016, 83-86. More generally see Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Les avant-gardes artistiques. Une histoire transnationale 1918-1945*, chapter 6.

<sup>31</sup> On museums in Latin America, see Michele Greet and Gina McDaniel Tarver (ed.), *Art Museums of Latin America: Structuring Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> A new building was added in 1954 to the *Stedelijk Museum* Amsterdam, while in 1957 the first steps were taken for a new building for modern collections at the *Nationalgalerie* Berlin, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and inaugurated in 1968.

Green call “the second wave of Biennial creation” from 1951.<sup>33</sup> In Brazil, the São Paulo Biennial was founded in 1951, at a time when the city continued to rely on modernity in its regional competition with Rio de Janeiro at the same time as it envisaged a new international influence. To attract a global audience, it made sense to choose odd years for its Biennial so as not to compete with Venice.

Creating a Biennial also proved to be an attractive strategy for countries that had chosen the wrong camp during the war. In Italy, the Milan Triennale was relaunched in 1947, shortly followed by the Rome Quadriennale and the Venice Biennale in 1948. In the difficult context of defeat and economic crisis, the resumption of cultural activity promised to reintegrate Italy into the concert of European nations.<sup>34</sup> In Japan, the Tokyo Biennial was launched in 1952. It was supported, like most major cultural events in Japan, by a Tokyo newspaper. At the biennial, the art of Japan was exhibited alongside – at the same level – as that of Western nations. “America, Belgium, Brazil, England, France, Italy, Japan”: the subtitle of the catalogue summarized the global scene of ‘great’ contemporary art in alphabetical order, without hierarchy.<sup>35</sup> Germany, too, played the game of modern art to return to the international scene. West Germany, conscious of the crimes of twenty years of Nazism, and anxious to distance itself from the Soviet bloc, needed perhaps more than any other nation to renew its global reputation. After an initial period of denazification, the new Republic returned to the international stage, and in 1951 founded The Goethe-Institute.<sup>36</sup> The city of Kassel was a major beneficiary of these initiatives. Situated in the far east of the democratic zone, it had suffered from bombing during the war and now its proximity to the Soviet border discouraged investors. Arnold Bode, an artist and teacher

who had been banned from working under the Nazis and had returned to his hometown, offered to help open up the city with a major exhibition of living art. The exhibition would take place in parallel with the *Bundesgartenschau*, a successful garden fair. *documenta* opened in June 1955 and attracted 130,000 visitors. A retrospective of modern art from Impressionism to 1940, organized by the historian Werner Haftmann, continued the national and international rehabilitation of German modern art with Haftmann defending abstract art as a universal language.<sup>37</sup>

Even in Franco’s Spain, an *Exposicion bienal hispano-american de arte estatutos* was inaugurated in Madrid in 1951, at a time when Spanish elite were seeking to develop relationships with the West.<sup>38</sup> In 1952, a Museo Nacional de Arte Contemporáneo was also opened in the basement of the National Library in Madrid.<sup>39</sup> Spain, which was isolated diplomatically and considered somewhat backward, began to organize exhibitions of modern Spanish art abroad from 1953 onwards. These foregrounded a supposedly ‘Spanish’ strain of lyrical abstract painting.<sup>40</sup> In subsequent years, the Hispano-American biennial toured to Cuba (1954) and Barcelona (1955).<sup>41</sup> As if to crown the liberalisation efforts of previous years, in 1955, Spain was admitted to the United Nations. A fourth Hispano-American biennial was planned for June 1958 in Caracas, Venezuela, but ultimately never came to fruition.

Non-aligned countries also joined the race. What Anthony Gardner calls the “Biennials of the South”<sup>42</sup> transcended the binary logic of the Cold

<sup>33</sup> Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> See Luciano Caramel (ed.), *Arte in Italia, 1945-1960* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1994), and Adrian Duran, *Painting, Politics, and the New Front of Cold War Italy* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> *The First international art exhibition, Japan: America, Belgium, Brazil, England, France, Italy, Japan*, edited by Tōkyō-to Bijutsukan and Mainichi Shinbunsha (Tokyo: Mainichi Newspapers, 1952).

<sup>36</sup> Gregory Paschalidis, ‘Exporting National Culture: Histories of Cultural Institutes Abroad’, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol.15, no.3, August 2009, 275-289.

<sup>37</sup> Werner Haftmann, ‘German Abstract Painters’, *College Art Journal*, vol. 14, no. 4, Summer 1955, 332-339.

<sup>38</sup> See Paula Barreiro López, *La abstracción geométrica en España, 1957-1969* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2009), introduction and chapter 1. See also Miguel Cabañas Bravo, *La política artística del franquismo. El hito de la Bienal Hispano-Americana de Arte* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1996), 70-sq.

<sup>39</sup> Valerie Lynn Hillings, ‘Experimental Artists’ Groups in Europe, 1951-1968. Abstraction, Interaction and Internationalism’, PhD, New York University, 2002, 62-sq.

<sup>40</sup> On this policy see Paula Barreiro López, *La Abstracción geométrica en España*.

<sup>41</sup> See Eva March Roig, ‘Franquismo y Vanguardia: III Bienal Hispanoamericana de Arte = Francoism and Avant-Garde: the 3rd Hispanoamerican Biennial of Art’, in *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma*, Serie VII Historia del arte, Revista de la Facultad de Geografía e historia, Madrid 2015, 33-54.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Gardner, ‘South as Method? Biennials Past and Present’, in *Making Biennials in Contemporary. Essays from the World Biennial Forum n°2 Sao Paulo, 2014* (Amsterdam and São Paulo: Biennial Foundation, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, ICCO – Instituto de Cultura Contemporânea, 2015), 28-36.

War to develop a third political and cultural path, at the same time as they sought to propel their political leaders to the world stage. The Ljubljana International Biennale of Graphic Arts (*Mednarodni Grafični Bienale*), founded in Yugoslavia in 1955 did not classify participants according to nationality, but according to their place of work, and managed to regularly bring together artists from both sides of the Iron Curtain. Another novelty in some Southern Biennials was their regional dimension. The First Biennial for the Arts of the Mediterranean Countries was inaugurated on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1955 at the Alexandria Museum of Fine Arts. The ambition was to strengthen the dialogue between Egypt and its Mediterranean partners. Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's leader, was banking on pan-Arab nationalism to bolster the area's still fragile independence and to promote regional unity in the face of ongoing conflicts caused by divisions between ethnic groups, religions and powerful families.<sup>43</sup> The Alexandria Biennale was also part of the burgeoning non-aligned movement. What was beginning to be called the Third World was asserting itself not so much as an immense peripheral zone, neglected but for the unscrupulous extraction of natural and human wealth, but as a dynamic geopolitical, diplomatic, and cultural entity. In 1956, the UNESCO conference held in New Delhi (5<sup>th</sup> November – 5<sup>th</sup> December) was a further step in this project. It stressed the importance of basing geopolitical agreements on strong cultural relations, whereas at the Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung in Indonesia 1955, only economic and political links had been mentioned.<sup>44</sup>

The Southern Biennials represented a challenge to the imperial logic of the North Atlantic. In 1958, the Mexican regime organized the first 'Inter-American Biennial' in Mexico City a response to the shenanigans of Franco's regime, which had been attempting to impose a new Hispanic hegemony on the South

<sup>43</sup> On the arts in Egypt see Nadia Radwan, 'Une renaissance des beaux-arts et des arts appliqués en Egypte : synthèses, ambivalences et définitions d'une nation imaginée (1908-1938)', PhD, Geneva, université de Genève, 2013. Published as *Les modernes d'Égypte : une Renaissance transnationale des Beaux-Arts et des Arts Appliqués* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> UNESCO, 'Major Project on Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values', *Records of the General Conference, Ninth Session, New Delhi 1956, Resolutions*, 4.8, 27.

American continent with its 'Hispano-American' biennials.<sup>45</sup> Despite its dependency on the US, Tehran founded its Biennial in 1958 as part of a similar 'third way' logic. The *Biennale de Paris* which started in 1959 was also a third-way strategy, overseen by the head of President De Gaulle's newly created Ministry of Culture, André Malraux. The wave continued with the rise of African biennials and their multidisciplinary equivalent, the African festivals in the 1960s, which were essential in the construction of a decolonized continent throughout this decade and the next. Once they had taken the reins of government and of the economy – the latter proved to be more elusive – the new ruling elites could turn to cultural projects. The festivals of Dakar (First World Festival of Black Arts, or FESMAN, in 1966), Algiers (First Pan-African Cultural Festival, or PANAFA, in 1969), Kinshasa (Zaire 1974) and Lagos (Second World Festival of Black Arts, or FESTAC, in 1977), to name only the most significant, were in line with these objectives: they sought to overcome existing geopolitical barriers with culture, and to allow new types of regional or ethnic identity to emerge.<sup>46</sup>

Ultimately, this global cultural history was one of diversity and polycentrism, but also a clear competition for cultural heft and reach. In this competition, metropolitan cultural and political elites sought out avant-gardes or started them from scratch when none were available. For examples of this, we need only to look to the story of Argentina's avant-gardes after the fall of the Peron regime, as Andrea Giunta has so convincingly demonstrated,<sup>47</sup> or the promotion of neo-concrete art in Brazil, which has

<sup>45</sup> My account of the Mexican Biennials draws on Fabiola Martínez' research, in particular her contribution to my seminar at École normale supérieure, 'The Hemispheric Politics of Mexico's Inter-American Biennials (1958 and 1960)', Séminaire Artl@s, Paris, ENS, May 2017. References to the Biennial can be found in Paula Barreiro López, Jesús Carrillo, and Fabiola Martínez, *Modernidad y vanguardia: rutas de intercambio y diálogo entre España y Latinoamérica*, exhibition catalogue, Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2015, N. 823576: *Primera Bienal Interamericana de pintura y grabado*, México D.F., 1958.

<sup>46</sup> For the Francophone world see *Africultures – les mondes en relation*, <http://africultures.com/>. See also Dominique Malaquais, Eloi Ficquet, Malika Rahal, Cédric Vincent, 'Panafest. Une archive en devenir', *Archive (re)mix Vues d'Afrique*, Rennes 2015, 209-228; David Murphy (ed.), *The First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar 1966. Contexts and Legacies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

<sup>47</sup> Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).



been explored by Sérgio B. Martins.<sup>48</sup> We would be remiss not to mention alongside these examples the promotion of Abstract Expressionism by New York's liberal circles as 'the' national 'American' art form, when in fact it differed so little from Europe's already established lyrical abstraction.<sup>49</sup> In the same way as their foreign counterparts across the globe – *and at the exactly the same time* – the USA was looking to promote a national avant-garde that would come to dominate the world.

### American Centrality and Central America: The Case of Mexico

The United States was far from the first nation to attempt to dominate the world through the arts after 1945. The remarkably proactive approach adopted by Mexico in the promotion of its art abroad is in itself reason enough for us to relativize the excessive focus placed on the artistic propaganda of the USA.

Mexico was among the most active nations in terms of cultural promotion, with extensive efforts pursued both domestically and internationally.<sup>50</sup> The National Institute of Beaux-Arts (INBA) was founded in 1946 to combat the influence of (European) artistic imports from abroad and to promote Mexican culture. Its department of Plastic Arts was involved in the organization of exhibitions of both ancient and contemporary Mexican arts in Europe and in the United States. This artistic propaganda was accompanied by what Adriana Ortega Orozco calls "celluloid diplomacy" in the form of a Television Commission.<sup>51</sup>

Mexico was also heavily involved in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization during its early days. Created as a site of reconciliation through cultural relationships, the UNESCO soon became another arena for global artistic rivalries. Mexico hosted one of its Annual

General Conferences in 1947, as well as the first ICOM conference, while a former Mexican Education Minister was appointed as the first general secretary of UNESCO between 1948 and 1952.<sup>52</sup> With the USSR and its satellite states refusing to participate until 1954, Mexico was the most left-wing regime present in the organization, and thus took on a central role in the cultural resistance to Western imperialism.

Another essential arena for Mexico's artistic diplomacy was the Venice Biennial. From the moment it resumed in 1948, it was the scene of a reconfiguration of the international geography of art. In Venice, observers were keen to see who would emerge at the vanguard of international modernity. When Mexico participated for the first time in the competition in 1950, its pavilion caused a sensation.<sup>53</sup> On show were sixty or so works by the '*cuatros grandes*': José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siquieros and Diego Rivera, along with Rufino Tamayo. After visiting the pavilion, French art historian and critic André Chastel announced in *Le Monde* that "the artistic geography of 1950s has its new world".<sup>54</sup> He was not, of course, referring to the USA. Carlos Chavez, the composer and director of the National Institute of Beaux-Arts in Mexico, was thrilled: all the reservations Europe had felt "towards America", he wrote to the pavilion's organizer, Fernando Gamboa, had been swept away.<sup>55</sup> Chavez was, of course, referring to *Latin America*. Gamboa was equally delighted. "Mexican painting," he wrote, "has appeared as a revelation for Europe. They find it powerful, original, inspired. Gone is the air of superiority with which they at first welcomed the idea of a Mexican art and indeed the hostility that some showed at the press conference organized at the Embassy in Rome."<sup>56</sup>

In 1950, during the Venice Biennial, the Grand Prix for painting of the Modern Art Museum of São Paulo

<sup>48</sup> Sérgio B. Martins, *Constructing an Avant-Garde: Art in Brazil 1949-1979* (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 2013).

<sup>49</sup> See Serge Guibault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, and Peter Johannes Schneemann, *Von der Apologie zur Theoriebildung: die Geschichtsschreibung des Abstrakten Expressionismus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003).

<sup>50</sup> Adriana Ortega Orozco, 'Les expositions d'art mexicain dans l'espace transnational', 162.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

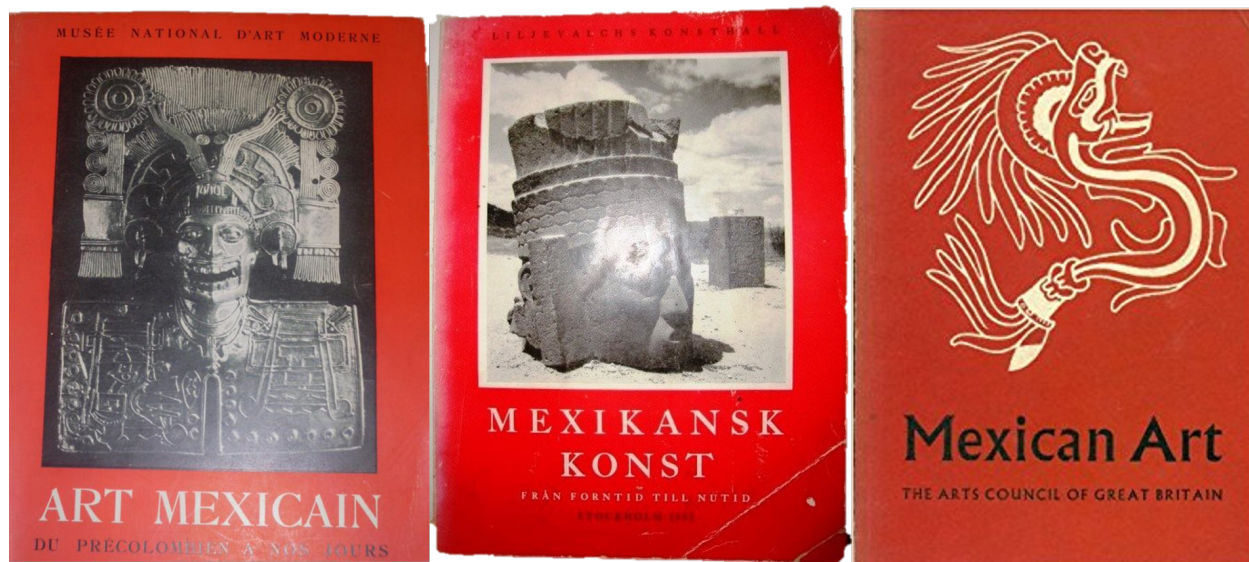
<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 193, from 'La XXVe Biennale consacre avec éclat l'entrée de l'art moderne dans l'histoire', *Le Monde*, 5 August 1950.

<sup>55</sup> Carlos Chávez, letter to Fernando Gamboa, Mexico, 13 June 1950; Adriana Ortega Orozco, 'Les expositions d'art mexicain dans l'espace transnational', 193.

<sup>56</sup> Fernando Gamboa to Carlos Chavez, Venice, 5 June 1950, from *Carlos Chávez, Epistolario selecto de Carlos Chávez*, Mexico, 1989, 533-534, quoted in *Ibid.*, 193.





**Figure 4.** *Art mexicain du précolombien à nos jours*, exhibition catalogue, May-July 1952 (Paris : Musée national d'art moderne Musée national d'art moderne, Les Presses artistiques, 1952); *Mexikansk Konst*, exhibition catalogue, Fall 1952 (Stockholm : Liljevashe Kunst Hall, 1952) ; *Mexican Art: From 1500bc to the Present Day*. Illustrated Supplement to the Exhibition Catalogue (London: Tate Gallery, 4 March to 26, 1953).

(MAM-SP) was awarded to Siqueiros, who came in second only to Matisse who won the Venice *Gran Premio*.<sup>57</sup> Gamboa credited Mexico with “the current orientation of art in the world, the extremes of which are precisely the formalism of the École de Paris and Mexican neorealism. Regarding this last point,” he continued, “we have already seen what happened at Venice, where, were it not for the protection of the interests of French art, we would have won first prize.”<sup>58</sup>

In the years following the war, Mexican art was thus able to construct a distinctive profile on the contemporary art scene, very different from that of New York which, as we shall see later, was lost in the broad international wave of lyrical abstraction. Mexican Muralism was both distinctly socialist and formally innovative, and could thus be perceived as a third way between abstraction and socialist realism. This was, in any case, an observation shared by Jean Cassou, the director of the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris, and by Nils Lindhagen, the director of the Swedish National Museum of Art,

both of whom disapproved of what they deemed the excessively rapid conquest of international exhibitions by (European) abstract art.<sup>59</sup> The major exhibition of Mexican art which opened in Paris in 1952 before heading to Stockholm and to London was thus organized amidst great enthusiasm (Figure 4).<sup>60</sup> It was a phenomenal public success, too: according to Adriana Ortega Orozco, more than 100,000 visitors came to see the Mexican exhibition in Paris which then travelled to Stockholm and London, where it drew crowds that were larger still (more than 210, 000 visitors in Stockholm, and more than 120, 000 for London).

### US Isolationism in a Golden Age of Cultural Diplomacy

Why did so many actors attach so great an importance to the development of structures for modern art and local avant-garde movements in the post-war period? The explanation is simple: art had become a major asset in cultural diplomacy, as well as in domestic politics. This was the prolongation of a movement which had begun in the 1930s, under

<sup>57</sup> ‘México triunfa en Venecia.’ *Tiempo: Semanario de la vida y la verdad* (Mexico City) 17, no.426 (June 1950): 24-27. I thank one of my reviewers who indicated me this reference. Document available on <https://icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/THEARCHIVE/FullRecord/tabid/88/doc/759059/language/en-US/Default.aspx> (accessed 18 January 2020).

<sup>58</sup> Fernando Gamboa to Carlos Chávez, 3 May 1951; quoted in Adriana Ortega Orozco, ‘Les expositions d’art mexicain dans l’espace transnational’, 208-209.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-195.

<sup>60</sup> *Art mexicain du précolombien à nos jours*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Musée national d’art moderne, 1952).

both democratic and totalitarian regimes. New factors linked to the Cold War endowed cultural diplomacy with an even greater strategic value than before: from the 1950s onwards, it became an essential part of commercial, industrial, colonial, and financial exchanges, not to mention a means of attracting crowds of international tourists.

Each country had its preferred strategic arenas in the years following the Second World War. Academic and artistic exchange programmes, the construction of libraries, and the organization of travelling exhibitions – hitherto affairs which were for the most part privately funded – received more and more state subsidies. This was particularly the case in France and Mexico, which both resumed their cultural diplomacy efforts as early as 1944. The French authorities wasted no time in re-establishing the nation's cultural infrastructure in the post-war period, starting in 1945 with the foundation of the *Direction des Arts et des Lettres* and the *Direction générale des Relations culturelles* (DGRC).<sup>61</sup> The organization's broad remit included French *lycées* (highschools) overseas, branches of the *Alliance française*, cultural centres, relationships with UNESCO, and the organization of exhibitions abroad. French embassies throughout the world opened culture departments and appointed cultural attachés for the first time. The National Museum of Modern Art soon began to take on a role in international relations: Jean Cassou, its director, oversaw relations with the American continent, while his adjunct Bernard Dorival focused on developing ties with Japan.

In the US, however, quite the opposite process was underway in the immediate postwar period. At first, the advent of the Cold War indeed marked not the explosion of artistic propaganda but rather the end of US support for North American modern art abroad. After 1945, support for the avant-garde was equated with support for the communists, as Serge Guilbaut has shown.<sup>62</sup> The best known epi-

sode in this regard was the controversy that marred the exhibition *Advancing American Art*, which was to travel to Europe and Latin America after its presentation in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in October 1946.<sup>63</sup> The American Artists Professional League protested against the works that made up the exhibition on the grounds that they were “strongly marked by the radicalism of the new trends in European art”.<sup>64</sup> The debate was brought before Congress in early 1947, at the time as the House Un-American Activities Committee's investigation of Hollywood. Some twenty artists, including several *Advancing American Art* exhibitors, were suspected of subversion by the committee, in particular Lithuanian-born painter Ben Shahn. As a result, the European tour of the exhibition was cancelled: *Advancing American Art* was stopped in its tracks. In March 1947, it was announced that no more public money would be spent on modern art in the United States. The attacks by Republican Representative George A. Dondero on modern art continued until the late 1950s, always in the same anti-communist vein.<sup>65</sup> In this context, those looking to illustrate the United States' prowess to the rest of the world preferred cars and refrigerators to innovative painting.<sup>66</sup>

The immediate postwar period was also marked by an absence of support by wealthy East Coast patrons for avant-garde art and its promotion abroad. In addition to a political context that equated the artistic vanguard with communism, the memory of their misadventures with the Mexican avant-garde in the 1930s was still fresh for the US' plutocrats.<sup>67</sup> It was not until late 1952 that the Rockefellers began to fund cultural diplomacy – other philanthropists would wait until after 1956<sup>68</sup> – with the Rockefeller

<sup>61</sup> Philippe Poirrier (ed.), *Les politiques culturelle en France* (Paris : La Documentation française, 2002); Laurent Martin, 'La politique culturelle de la France après 1945', in Philippe Poirrier (ed.), *Pour une histoire des politiques culturelles dans le monde, 1945-2011* (Paris : La Documentation française, 2011), 241-263.

<sup>62</sup> Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, chapter 3 ; Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists. Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy, 1946-1959* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), and Catherine Dossin, "Stories of

the Western Artworld 1936-1986: From the Fall of Paris to the Invasion of New York," PhD., the University of Texas at Austin, 2008, 49 sq.

<sup>63</sup> *Art Interrupted: Advancing American Art and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy*, exhibition catalogue Dennis Harper ed. (Athens (GA), Georgia Museum of Art, 2013).

<sup>64</sup> *Art Digest*, 15 November 1946, 32

<sup>65</sup> Archives of American Art, George Anthony Dondero papers, 1949-1965, Two reads on art and communism (1957), and a memorandum of the House Un-American Activities Committee, 1956.

<sup>66</sup> For instance at the 1948 *Salon de l'automobile* de Paris.

<sup>67</sup> See Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican muralists in the United States*, and Anna Indych-Lopez, *Muralism without Walls*.

<sup>68</sup> Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, 'Les philanthropes de l'art des États-Unis après 1945. Acteurs ou victimes du "triomphe de l'art américain" ?' *Relations internationales*, vol. 181, 1, 2020, 43-63.

Brothers' Fund making a donation to MoMA for the institution to develop a five-year 'International Program of Circulating Exhibitions'.<sup>69</sup>

The Rockefeller Brothers' Fund had been established in 1940, and in 1951 received a \$58 million gift from John D. Rockefeller Jr. on behalf of his five sons. The \$125,000 yearly grant provided by the foundation for the International Program of Circulating Exhibitions in 1952 was small change for the Rockefellers. But before then, the Cold War had seemingly provided insufficient reason for reviving a policy of artistic patronage that had been abandoned twenty years prior, and which the rise in anti-communist sentiment had rendered less appealing still. Nelson Rockefeller, the second son of the heir to the Standard Oil empire, had been involved in US relations with Latin America and in the anti-communist struggle since the 1940s. Despite his departure from the administration in 1945, he continued his initiatives that combined philanthropy and economic cooperation, and encouraged his siblings to join him in his efforts.<sup>70</sup> This generation of Rockefellers did not, however, immediately turn to artistic propaganda, and it was only in 1952 that they became interested in modern art and its potential for diplomacy – a rather late awakening to Cold War politics for so prominent a family.

### **Bad Press, Southern Upstarts and the Rockefellers' Late Entry into the Field of Artistic Propaganda**

The Rockefellers' late (re)entry into the arena of artistic propaganda can likely be explained by the threat to their reputation that arose with the investigations set up by the Federal Trade Commission to fight against monopolies. These investigations were prompted by fears that the credits granted to Europeans under the Marshall Plan would serve only to enrich large oil companies. In 1952, the Commission threatened to publicize the

<sup>69</sup> Details on this budget in Porter A. McCray papers, 1939-1989. AAA, Box 10, Folder 22, Reports on the International Program, 1952-1961, 14 December 1956.

<sup>70</sup> Gerard Colby and Charlotte Dennet, *Thy Will be Done. The Conquest of the Amazon. Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil* (New York: Open Road Media, 2017) 228.

Achnacarry agreements of 1928, under which the largest oil companies had divided up the world oil market, with US companies, including the most powerful, Rockefeller-owned Standard Oil, claiming Latin America as their own.<sup>71</sup> The US government insisted that it had little choice but to publicize the agreement, which would be "extremely harmful to our foreign relations and would furnish the Russians with excellent propaganda material".<sup>72</sup> Standard Oil's leaders needed to prove their patriotism, and fast. At a time when New York art was gaining *national* recognition, it made sense to position it as the herald of the 'American avant-garde', whose ostensible international superiority it could subsequently underpin.

Another reason for the Rockefellers' rekindled interest in philanthropy came from the fact that even billionaires were not immune to imitation and emulation. The Rockefellers were regular visitors to Europe, where nations were taking steps to bolster their image through culture, France in particular. As we have already seen, America's 'Southern Neighbor', Mexico, was striving to "become a world cultural center" and preparing a blockbuster exhibition of Mexican art destined for Paris, London, and Stockholm; indeed, this exhibition almost made its way to the United States.<sup>73</sup> Artistic diplomacy was also in full swing in Brazil, following the opening of its museum of modern art in 1948, the success in 1951 of the inaugural São Paulo Biennale, and the promotion of the concrete and later neo-concrete avant-garde. One of the key figures behind these initiatives was industrialist Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, who the Rockefellers knew well from his contacts with Standard Oil.<sup>74</sup> It was Matarazzo who founded the Museu de Arte São Paulo (MASP) in 1948. Though it was

<sup>71</sup> Matthieu Auzanneau, *Or noir. La grande histoire du pétrole* (Paris : La Découverte, 2015), 140-143.

<sup>72</sup> Department of Justice File, 60-57-140, Report of John Edgar Hoover (Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation) to the Acting Attorney General relative to the Report of the Federal Trade Commission on the International Petroleum Cartel, 7 Mai 1952; Burton I. Kaufman, *The Oil Cartel Case: A Documentary Study of Antitrust Activity in the Cold War Era* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers Inc., 1978), 121-122.

<sup>73</sup> We do not know why the Mexican exhibition did not tour to the USA finally.

<sup>74</sup> 'Matarazzo, Cicillo (1898-1977)', *Enciclopédia Itaú Cultural artes visuais*, [www.itaucultural.org](http://www.itaucultural.org). On the relationship between Matarazzo and Nelson Rockefeller, see Serge Guilbaut, 'Léon Degand's Ship of Fools: The Cargo-Cult Phenomenon of Geometric Abstraction in Brazil 1947', online on the website *Los Estudios de Arte desde América Latina, Temas y problemas*, [http://www.esteticas.unam.mx/edartedal/PDF/Queretaro/complets/Guilbaut\\_Queretaro.pdf](http://www.esteticas.unam.mx/edartedal/PDF/Queretaro/complets/Guilbaut_Queretaro.pdf) (Accessed 2 February 2020).



modelled on the private operation of MoMA, MASP was organized according to European aesthetic criteria (much to Nelson Rockefeller's chagrin).<sup>75</sup> Following on from this museum, Matarazzo founded the Biennial of Modern Art in São Paulo. For the second edition, in 1953, he secured the loan of Picasso's *Guernica* from MoMA, which had been received the canvas for safekeeping since the outbreak of war. The fact that Picasso was a communist meant that this coup of artistic diplomacy would have been all the more galling for the Rockefellers. The success of Mexico and Brazil in the artistic field was real cause for concern for the Rockefeller brothers: Latin Americans – whom they despised – were unquestionably outdoing the United States, which at the time was all but absent from the international art scene. Thus, in 1952, promoting their country's art internationally through support for the International Program of Circulating Exhibitions at MoMA was an attractive and obvious means for the American philanthropists to play catch up – in other words, to deprovincialize the USA.

The start of an official, government artistic propaganda effort followed almost immediately, with the creation in 1953 of the United States Information Agency (USIA), probably on the advice of Nelson Rockefeller who had recently become Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Government Organization.<sup>76</sup> Polishing up a tarnished national image was also an important part of the project: MoMA began to organize its international exhibition program towards the end of the United States' involvement in the bloody Korean War.

The USA would thus jump on the bandwagon of cultural diplomacy somewhat later than other nations, pushing further backwards in time the country's global promotion of its own artistic production. Art historians must remember (and should teach) that until 1953, US art was not circulating across the world in any meaningful way, and that until the end of the 1950s, as we shall see, it interested and impressed almost no one. In 1952, the year of the

international program's founding, no MoMA exhibitions were held outside of the US; the first international exhibition was initially presented at MoMA before travelling abroad, which would seem to confirm that, for the Rockefellers, programme was as much about improving their reputation at home as promoting their nation's art abroad. Similarly, subsequent international exhibitions would always be presented at MoMA before travelling abroad: these were tentative launches rather than triumphant homecomings. The widely-circulated press releases for these exhibitions accordingly announce the *future* course of these projects rather than containing retrospective reports of their global success. Similarly, the maps the MoMA presented at the 1959 exhibition *The new American painting, as shown in eight European countries, 1958-1959* and a well-known map drawn for the *MoMA Bulletin* in 1960 suggested that the MoMA sent paintings all over the world – which was not the case.<sup>77</sup> Even today, MoMA's international programme still plays with images and maps: its website publishes maps of its international exhibitions that obscure any historical evolution and differentiation between exhibitions, making it seem as if the world had been flooded with American avant-garde painting as early as 1952 (figure 5).

In fact, there were very few international exhibitions dedicated to the fine arts. Furthermore, until 1956, these exhibitions, when dedicated to Fine Arts, were limited almost exclusively to Europe, and it was only after 1957 that they became global in scope. MoMA made a particular effort in sending exhibitions of Photography, Design, Architecture and Industry from Latin America to Eastern Europe and to some Asian countries.<sup>78</sup> (See Maps on Figs. 7a, 7b, 7c, 7d, 7e). MoMA devoted much more energy to promoting US designers, architects and photographers, as well as the country's industrial productions (cars and refrigerators in particular),

<sup>77</sup> *The new American painting, as shown in eight European countries, 1958-1959*. Organized by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, under the auspices of the International Council at the Museum of Modern Art, 1959. Photos of the display on [https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1990?installation\\_image\\_index=0](https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1990?installation_image_index=0). See also the map reproduced for instance in <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61041/american-tutti-frutti/> (consulted 24 December 2020).

<sup>78</sup> Detailed analysis in: Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, "Les philanthropes de l'art des États-Unis après 1945".

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Gerard Colby and Charlotte Dennet, *Thy Will be Done*, 268-269.

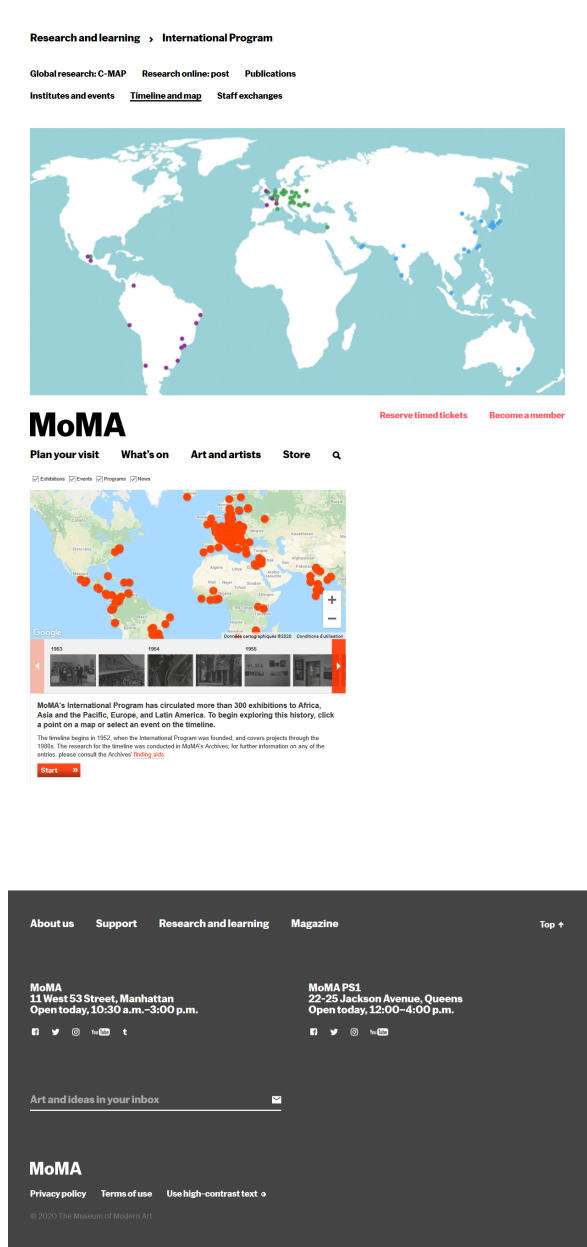


Figure 5. <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/international-program/timeline> (accessible 24 December 2020).

than to focusing on the fine arts. Painting itself was sent out less than exhibitions of drawings and engravings, which were much lighter and cheaper to circulate - but which could hardly attract crowds.

### Whose Focal Point? Latin America Looks to Europe

A comparative and circulatory transnational approach enables us to relativize even further the

myth which holds that the USA was the global focal point for art after 1945.

In Latin America, the example to follow was not the USA, but Mexico. The Brazilian critic and painter Mário Baratta was active in the foundation of the *Centro Cultural de Belas Artes* in Fortaleza, in the Nordeste, the nation's poorest region; shortly afterwards, in July 1945, he wrote that

... more and more, I believe in the art of Brazil, which must be born and born powerful and virile, like the art of Mexico; it will likely come not from the cosmopolitan metropolises but rather from the North, where the earth is the most Brazilian of all. Let us bury imported modern art from the dull Paris salons. On its cadaver, let the us profit from our liberty with a Brazilian art for Brazil.<sup>79</sup>

As Baratta's comments suggest, for some, the United States did not even enter into the equation. Mexico's was the model to follow (or reject) for national art, while Europe provided the model for international art.

Despite their own Northern and Southern American networks, the founders of the São Paulo Biennial, the industrialist Ciccillo Matarazzo and his wife Yolanda, reflexively looked to Europe.<sup>80</sup> The couple had extensive international experience in both the business and cultural fields. They were fixtures of the city's elite financial and cultural circles and belonged to a milieu that had been committed to introducing modern art, modern architecture, and modern literature to Brazil since the 1920s. It was also a network that maintained an ongoing dialogue with Paris' artistic scene, as well as with Italy (Matarazzo's country of origin), Germany and Switzerland. On one retreat to Switzerland, for instance, Matarazzo had met the German art dealer, Karl Nierendorf, who, before the Nazis seized power, had been an enthusiastic advocate for primitive art and German post-expressionism in his

<sup>79</sup> Mário Baratta, 'O velha arte moderna (le vieil art moderne)', 8 July 1945, quoted in Carolina Ruoso, 'Nid de frelons. Neuf temps pour neuf atlas. Histoire d'un musée d'art brésilien (1961-2011)', unpublished doctoral dissertation, Paris, université de Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne, 2016, 96.

<sup>80</sup> See 'Matarazzo, Ciccillo (1898-1977)', *Enciclopédia Itaú Cultural artes visuais*, [www.itaucultural.org](http://www.itaucultural.org).



home country. Nierendorf encouraged Matarazzo to open his modern art museum in São Paulo with a large show of European abstract art. In April 1949, the Museum of Modern Art São Paulo opened its inaugural exhibition, curated by the Belgian-Parisian critic Léon Degand. Kandinsky, Delaunay, Arp, Calder, and other representatives of European pre-war abstract modernity were presented alongside more contemporary European abstract artists such as Vasarely. Brazilian artists were thus encouraged to compare themselves to their European counterparts. Matarazzo steered the museum's acquisitions policy according to the advice of Italian abstract artist Alberto Magnelli, with further assistance from Margherita Sarfatti, the erstwhile girlfriend of Mussolini. Leon Degand was also chosen as the first Director of MAM-SP.<sup>81</sup> This was the context in which the industrialist initiated his project for the São Paulo Biennial.

In Argentina, progressive elites similarly decided to adopt an international, Europe-oriented outlook to break with the nationalist populism of the Peronist period, as Andrea Giunta has shown.<sup>82</sup> Europe would be the example to follow for the arts, especially for the 'Paris of South America', Buenos Aires. Jorge Romero Brest, an art critic and former opposition figure under Perón's populist dictatorship, joined efforts to move his country out of what he referred to as its "suicidal isolation" following the regime's collapse in 1955. When he presented the Argentinian contribution to the 1956 São Paulo Biennial, he insisted upon the importance of "reaching the same level as all the other civilized countries on the planet" and of 'speaking the free language of modernity.'<sup>83</sup> This message was addressed to Europe and not to the United States, which visibly had little interest in the democratization of Latin America. There are also revealing differences between the exhibitions of Argentinian art sent to the United States and those dispatched to Europe during this period, as Andrea Giunta

has observed.<sup>84</sup> In April 1956, the new Argentinian state opened an exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington D.C., which subsequently travelled to several other North American cities. The exhibition featured traditional paintings with well-known *gauchesco* themes. By contrast, an exhibition held in Venice that same year foregrounded the plastic languages that were currently in vogue across Western Europe, as if Argentina had subtly slipped into the old continent's time zone.

Further examples that illustrate the absence of US art from the horizon of cultural stakeholders prior to the 1960s abound. The recollections of the founder of the Ljubljana biennial and director of the city's museum of modern art, Zoran Kržišnik, are telling in this respect. Speaking in 2007, he recalled that: "We set up the biennale in order to make our way into the world. It was a way of opening doors. And – thankfully – I managed to attract important graphic arts experts for the jury, such as the well-known critic from Venice Giuseppe Marchiori."<sup>85</sup>

He went on to say,

I knew very well then that if I wanted to start the biennale, I had to have, for example, the whole of École de Paris behind me as a kind of a 'visiting card' that would open doors and ensure that others would also want to work with us. And that's exactly how it was, on the strength of the fact that I persuaded the reputable École de Paris to participate, twelve countries replied that they would also take part.<sup>86</sup>

### "In spite of everything": The Enduring Prestige of the École de Paris

As Kržišnik account of the founding of the Ljubljana biennial suggests, the École de Paris still enjoyed an enviable prestige in the post-war period. In December 1955, the Milanese art dealer Guido Le Noci wrote the following unequivocal lines to the young

<sup>81</sup> On Degand see <https://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/auteur/degand-leon>. Accessed 22 January 2020.

<sup>82</sup> Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics*.

<sup>83</sup> Jorge Romero Brest presenting the Argentinian Selection at the São Paulo Biennial, 1956, quoted in Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics*, 58.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 59, and 62-63.

<sup>85</sup> Zoran Kržišnik, interview, September 2007. In Beti Žerovc, *Kurator & sodobna umetnost, pogovori* (Ljubljana: Maska, 2008), 36-48. <https://29gljubljana.wordpress.com/history/interview-with-zoran-krzisnik/>, accessed 28 June 2019.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

Parisian art critic Pierre Restany: “I would like for my gallery to specialize in the École de Paris [. . .]. Paris, in spite of everything, remains the place, the climate of contemporary painting.”<sup>87</sup> Even in 1959, when Restany suggested to Le Noci that he might organize an exhibition of young Italian, Swiss, French and North American artists, the dealer sent the following reply:

My mind is in Paris and in Paris alone: let us find the best and the most alive of what Paris has to offer. You will say that I, too, am a provincial, but I have enough experience: if there is anything worthwhile out there it is in Paris, and elsewhere nothing but pretentious parrots who can but repeat three or four phrases over and over again, nothing more.<sup>88</sup>

As Catherine Dossin’s study of Italy, Belgium, Germany, and Britain has shown, until the end of the 1950s, international collectors showed a strong preference for modern art that was produced and valorised in Europe, and in Paris in particular.<sup>89</sup> In Britain, the collections of Sir Edward and Lady Hulton ran “from Tintoretto to de Staël”<sup>90</sup>; other significant collections – those of Alexander and Stella Margulies, Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, and Ted Power, for example – similarly paid scant attention to North American Abstract Expressionism. Catherine Dossin has also shown how US collectors remained faithful to art produced in Paris, despite their burgeoning interest in Abstract Expressionism. Art dealer Leo Castelli continued to sell Parisian painting to New York’s collectors – a detail conveniently omitted from his hagiography – even as he supported an up-and-coming local generation.<sup>91</sup> For all the talk of ‘the triumph of American art’, Parisian painting clearly still had numerous fans on the other side of the Atlantic: its admirers

were simply more discreet and less mediatized in the USA than the collectors who supported local art. Moreover, even the most patriotic collectors of ‘American’ art tended to have significant amounts of European work amongst their collections – a fact which, again, US journalists overlooked – although the presence of these works was unseemly amidst the nationalist fervour of the Cold War. As Titia Hulst has demonstrated, accounts that trumpet the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism in cultural and geopolitical terms neglect art market considerations, which by contrast show that the commercial breakthrough of the new wave of art in New York actually “lagged significantly behind its critical success”.<sup>92</sup>

## Japan: Another International Upstart

If we turn our focus towards artistic scenes beyond Paris, we are forced to dedicate significantly more attention to avant-gardes in Milan, Mexico and Japan than to those in North America. For instance, at the end of the 1950s, the international breakthrough of the Japanese avant-garde Gutai was arguably more effective than that of Abstract Expressionism. Towards 1958, Gutai came to represent a new path for avant-gardes that had grown weary of abstraction. It was in that year that the Musée national d’art moderne in Paris hosted an exhibition entitled *Japanese Art Through the Centuries*, which enjoyed an unprecedented international success.<sup>93</sup> The exhibition was considered by the MNAM’s curators as one of its major triumphs, creating a “global echo” (Fig. 6).<sup>94</sup>

Gutai emerged from a country whose relatively recent participation in European-style artistic modernism lent it a certain mystique. The group was exhibited by the critic Michel Tapié, in Paris in 1958

<sup>87</sup> Guido Le Noci to Pierre Restany, December 1955, quoted in Jean-Marc Poinot, ‘Géographies de Pierre Restany’, in Richard Leeman (ed.), *Le Demi-siècle de Pierre Restany* (Paris: INHA / Éditions des Cendres, 2009), 220-226.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>89</sup> Catherine Dossin, ‘Stories of the Western Artworld’, 86. See also Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s-1980s, A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2015), and Sarah Wilson, ‘Duncan Phillips et Robert Sainsbury: L’École de Paris en Angleterre et en Amérique’, in *L’École de Paris? 1945-1964*, exhibition catalogue, Musée national d’histoire et d’art du Luxembourg (Luxembourg : Fondation Musée d’art moderne Grand-Duc Jean, 1998), 39-55.

<sup>90</sup> Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art*, 90.

<sup>91</sup> Annie Cohen-Solal, *Leo and His Circle: The Life of Leo Castelli* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

<sup>92</sup> Titia Hulst, ‘The Vicissitudes of Taste: The Market for Pop’, *Journal for Art Market Studies*, vol. 2, 2017, 1-14. Accessible online: <https://fokum-jams.org/index.php/jams/article/download/10/32> (accessed 29 June 2019).

<sup>93</sup> *L’art japonais à travers les siècles*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Musée national d’art moderne, 16 April-3 June 1958.

<sup>94</sup> Bernard Dorival, *L’École de Paris au Musée national d’art moderne de Paris* (Paris : Somogy, 1961), 31, quoted by Adriana Ortega Orozco, ‘Les expositions d’art mexicain dans l’espace transnational’, 379.



Figure 6. *L'art japonais à travers les siècles*, exhibition catalogue (Paris : Musée national d'art moderne, 16 April-3 June 1958)

and in Turin in 1959.<sup>95</sup> The French critic lauded the Japanese avant-garde's superiority and was remarkably open to it, and indeed the differences between the receptions enjoyed by Gutai in Europe and in North America are particularly striking. In New York, Jackson Pollock had the second and third issues of the group's eponymous journal, although specialists seem unsure as to what he made of it. Tapié and painter George Mathieu, by contrast, travelled all the way to Japan to collaborate with Gutai. In 1958 in New York, the Martha Jackson Gallery opened its fall season with an exhibition that borrowed elements from a previous Gutai exhibition held in Osaka. The show, *International Art of a New Era*, was in fact organized by Tapié. Martha Jackson imported Gutai to boost the stalling market for action painting, hoping to demonstrate the international influence of Abstract Expressionism – a style of which her gallery had long been a bastion, but which was now in need of a revamp in

<sup>95</sup> Eric Mézil, "Nul n'est prophète en son pays" le cas de Michel Tapié", in *Gutai* (Paris : Jeu de Paume, 1999), 24-41.

New York. Hence the assertion in the gallery's press release that "(Gutai's) inspiration comes from the 'new American painting'; art historian Ming Tiampo sees in this phrase as an example of "cultural mercantilism".<sup>96</sup> Thus despite the fact that Gutai drew on an incredibly diverse range of sources, New York critics dutifully presented the movement as disciples of a recently deceased Pollock.

The transnational circulation of Gutai illustrates a classic phenomenon wherein cultural transfer, translation, adaptation, and (often unconscious) manipulation combine with one another; such cases are among the most interesting facets of artistic internationalization.<sup>97</sup> In light of this case and others, it is particularly fascinating (and perplexing) that the notion of the global profile and prestige of New York's Abstract Expressionism – in reality a highly local, provincial story based on a good deal of misinformation – should have been accepted throughout the world, swallowed whole without ever having been checked against what we quaintly used to call 'facts'.

## Re-evaluating the Reception of US Art through the Prism of Circulation

Having examined various aspects of the global artistic scene in the 1950s, and underscored the relative isolation of the art of the United States within this scene, let us now examine what kinds of art from the US were well-known abroad. As we will see, such an analysis of the reception US art does nothing to confirm the hypothesis of US supremacy after 1945.

Let us begin by asking how much space was given to US art by Latin American avant-gardes in the 1950s. The short answer is very little indeed. When Latin American artists were interested in art from the States, they had some difficulty accessing it, as

<sup>96</sup> Ming Tiampo, 'Cultural Mercantilism. Modernism's Means of Production. The Gutai Group as Case Study', in Jonathan Harris (ed.), *Globalization and Contemporary Art* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 215.

<sup>97</sup> Michel Espagne, *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands* (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, coll. Perspectives germaniques, 1999) ; see also his article, 'La notion de transfert culturel', *Revue Sciences/Lettres*, vol.1, 2013, <http://rsl.revues.org/219> ; DOI : 10.4000/rsl.219, accessed 29 June 2019.

Andrea Giunta has shown.<sup>98</sup> Even the holdings of the Argentine industrialist and collector Guido Di Tella, which developed largely after 1958, were far from dominated by North American art. Although Di Tella had the means to purchase such works, it seems that the New York galleries refused to sell a Pollock to a Latin American: until 1961, none of the galleries or museums contacted by the Di Tella Institute deigned to exhibit their artists in Latin America.

Similarly, the study of trajectories of works of art imported to Europe from the USA after 1945 and their various receptions across different countries overturns several received ideas surrounding this period. Catherine Dossin's meticulous analysis of exhibitions of art from the United States in Europe has shown that, even as they progressively began to include the *names* of artists considered in New York to be 'action painters', it was only at a much later stage that these exhibitions featured *works* that could truly be said to be abstract expressionist *visually*. Indeed, this is indicative of art history's ongoing difficulty in differentiating between artists' names and their actual works.

The actors who introduced the first North American avant-gardes to Europe foregrounded a surrealist, European heritage. Abstract expressionist art thus has relatively little visibility in Europe until the end of the 1950s, even at exhibitions organized abroad by MoMA. To give an example discussed by Catherine Dossin, Pollock's European reception initially concerned his figurative and surrealist work. When MoMA's Pollock retrospective and *New American Painting* exhibitions toured Europe in 1958 and 1959 respectively, they failed to secure him a reputation as an artistic innovator.<sup>99</sup> Pollock was altogether too late to the game: the Europeans saw nothing different from the lyrical abstract painting they were already familiar with. The 'drippings' that were shown in Europe failed to outshine local work, even on the basis of their size,

<sup>98</sup> Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics*, 100.

<sup>99</sup> Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art*, 135-143 and Catherine Dossin, 'To Drip or to Pop? The European Triumph of American Art', *Artl@s Bulletin*, vol.3, no.1, 2014, <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol3/iss1/8/>, accessed 1 August 2020.

as Dossin shows. Contrary to what we usually hear or read about Abstract Expressionism's supersize impact relative to that of supposedly more diminutive European paintings, as far as local audiences were concerned, the works of Hartung, Schneider, Soulages and Mathieu still came out on top. Finally, as Dossin has again shown, the majority of US art exhibited in Europe in the 1950s had little to do with the 'American art' of the modernist canon. Mark Tobey, a Wisconsin native working in Seattle, travelled regularly to Europe and was better known than Pollock and Rothko there in the 1950s.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Clement Greenberg's ideas made no headway in Europe until as late as the 1980s.<sup>101</sup> The so-called 'American' avant-garde and its champions could only dream of the international influence that Parisian movements and their theorists enjoyed: the examples of André Breton and Michel Tapié, who were known and appreciated throughout Latin America, Central Europe, and Japan, ought to be evidence enough of this state of affairs. In Europe, the avant-garde of the USA, when it was known at all, was at best considered as no more than an endearing younger sibling, and this until the 1960s.<sup>102</sup>

British audiences were as sceptical as their French counterparts when it came to the quality of North American art. Pollock, the scion of New York's artistic innovation, enjoyed no exposure in the United Kingdom before 1953. And even then, he was represented by just two small canvases which went on display at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Tapié's exhibition *Opposing Forces*, leading to a minor and misinformed reception of Abstract

<sup>100</sup> Catherine Dossin, 'Quand Paris s'enthousiasmait pour Mark Tobey, 1945-1962', in Laurence Bertrand-Dorléac, Thomas Kirchner, Déborah Laks, and Nele Putz (ed.), *Les arts à Paris après la Libération: temps et temporalités* (Heidelberg: Arthistoricum.net, 2017), 48-57.

<sup>101</sup> In France, Greenberg does not appear to have been published before 1977. The first translations of his texts into French relate to his writings on Pollock ('Dossier Jackson Pollock. Peinture à l'américaine', *Macula*, 2, 1977, 57-66, and 'Dossier Jackson Pollock. II: les textes sur Pollock', *Macula*, 2, 1977, 36-56). His well-known essay 'Avant-garde and Kitsch' did not appear until 1987 (*Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, vol.19, no.20, 1987, 158-169). In Spain, the earliest translation of Greenberg's texts is traceable to 1979 (*Goya*, vol.151/156, 1979/1980, 128); in Italy, it was in 1988, and this, in a journal published in Washington ('La Crisi della pittura da Cavalotto', in *Il Luogo dell'arte oggi, Quaderni di The Foundation for Improving Understanding of the Arts*, no.2, Washington 1988, 129-134). In the German-speaking world, the earliest article mentioning Greenberg dates from 1990, and the first German translation of Greenberg's writing appears to have been edited in 1997 (*Die Essenz der Moderne: ausgewählte Essays und Kritiken* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1997).

<sup>102</sup> See also Thomas Kellein, 'It's the Sheer Size: European Responses to American Art', in *American Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture, 1913-1993*, exhibition catalogue, Berlin, Martin Gropius Bau, 1993 and London, Royal Academy, 1993, 187-194.



Expressionism in Britain.<sup>103</sup> London's critics were underwhelmed to say the least. In 1956, they still insisted that "these paintings should neither shock nor surprise those familiar with abstract or non-figurative painting in Europe."<sup>104</sup> This markedly blasé reception went unchanged even in 1958, when the Pollock retrospective circulated from the São Paulo Biennial in 1957 to Rome, Basel, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Berlin, London and finally to Paris. A revelation it was not.

In West Germany, even in 1953 Parisian abstraction and in particularly its lyrical strain was still being discovered, and German artists were well represented within this trend, including, for example, Hans Hartung, Wols, and Willi Baumeister. The reception of Abstract Expressionism thus came much later there. It was limited to its brightest stars – despite the best efforts of MoMA's international program. The major itinerant exhibition *The New American Painting / Neue amerikanische Malerei* that toured Germany in 1958 failed to make the impression hoped for by its organizers, who were seemingly unaware that they were exporting a kind of art which was already well-known in Europe.

Catherine Dossin's close analysis of sources further demonstrates that in Italy, the reception of North American abstract expression was minimal, even if some Italian artists such as Piero Dorazio and Alberto Burri were aware of what was going on in New York.<sup>105</sup> The Italian avant-garde drew its dynamism from a transnational network that stretched from Paris to Buenos Aires and which was largely unconcerned with the existential themes of lyrical abstraction and Abstract Expressionism. By contrast, Lucio Fontana's influence in Italy and beyond was very strong during this period.<sup>106</sup> On a more local level, art from New York was certainly not a point of reference for Italy's avant-garde milieu,

unlike *Arte nucleare*, which dealt in the concrete and in presence in the world, not in lyricism. Alberto Burri meanwhile broke new ground with *matérialisme*; this approach even left its mark, around 1953, on a young New York generation anxious to break with Abstract Expressionism and what they perceived as its naïve idealism: Rauschenberg, Johns, Twombly, Oldenburg all looked to Europe.<sup>107</sup> Who influenced whom?

Let us turn now to France. Of all the US art exhibited there as part of the country's foreign cultural policy efforts, it was only older art – the best represented in such exhibitions – that received a warm welcome. US Abstract Expressionism was considered as merely one offshoot amongst others of a movement that had begun in Paris, namely gestural abstraction. The organizers of US art exhibitions, keen to find favour in France, adapted their shows to meet the expectations of Parisian audiences. With the establishment of MoMA's international program, the New York director Alfred Barr came to Paris to meet Jean Cassou, the director of the Musée national d'art moderne, and to propose an exhibition of contemporary US art. Cassou requested that Barr provide work by established artists that would reflect the diversity of artistic production on the other side of the Atlantic, in line with the MNAM's eclectic approach. And he obtained just that.<sup>108</sup> In April 1953, the modestly entitled exhibition *-Twelve American Painters and Sculptors* opened at the MNAM.<sup>109</sup> The show was not on the same scale as the longer-running exhibition of Mexican art at the MNAM the previous year. The 'American' exhibition of 12 artists later travelled to Zurich, Düsseldorf, Stockholm, Helsinki, and Oslo, where it enjoyed a positive reception, although hardly that of a blockbuster, as Catherine Dossin has shown.

Around the same time, a competition organized in Paris by the *Comité des Artistes américains de France* was cancelled due to the lack of quality competitors.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 206. See also *Opposing Forces*, exhibition catalogue, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 28 January-28 February 1953.

<sup>104</sup> Basil Taylor, 'Contemporary Arts: Modern American Painting', *Spectator*, 20 January 1956, 80; quoted by Jeremy Lewison, 'Jackson Pollock and the Americanization of Europe', in Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (eds.), *Jackson Pollock. New Approaches* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 201-231.

<sup>105</sup> Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art*, 27.

<sup>106</sup> See Luciano Caramel (ed.), *Arte in Italia: 1945-1960*, and Adrian Duran, *Painting, Politics, and the New Front of Cold War Italy*.

<sup>107</sup> See for instance Aruna D'Souza, "'I Think Your Work Looks a Lot Like Dubuffet': Dubuffet and America, 1946-1962", *Oxford Art Journal*, vol.20, no.2 (1997), 61-73.

<sup>108</sup> Ivan Albright, Edward Hopper, Arshile Gorky, Morris Graves, Khon Kane, John Marin, Jackson Pollock, Ben Shahn, Stuart Davis, Alexander Calder, Theodore Roszak, and David Smith.

<sup>109</sup> *12 peintres et sculpteurs américains contemporains*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne, April-June 1953.



The cancellation was proposed by Cassou, who was a member of the jury, so as “not to disappoint the French public with a second-class exhibition”.<sup>110</sup> If there was an outcry in the United States, it did not change the low estimation in which American art was held by Parisian art specialists.<sup>111</sup>

From April to July 1955, a larger exhibition entitled *Fifty Years of American Art in Paris* was presented at the MNAM in Paris. The US magazine *Time*, quoted by Serge Guilbaut, optimistically reported that “Modern American art stormed through Paris”, and that the city was witnessing “the advance patrol of a US culture parade”.<sup>112</sup> Yet, as Dossin observes, the exhibition drew a paltry 2,500 visitors. Even *Time* recognized the somewhat ambivalent reception of the show:

French artists took a hard, professional look at Jackson Pollock’s chaotic drip paintings and Clyfford Still’s brooding black canvas. But most Parisians, rocked by what they considered a meaningless world, gave up trying to find anything ‘American’ in most US abstractionists.<sup>113</sup>

We might simply remark that Parisians had been exposed to similar kinds of abstract painting for years, both in Paris and in other European capitals.

By the time MoMA’s international program began sending Abstract Expressionism to Europe after 1958, it was too late. The abstract avant-garde from the United States was seen at best as an outgrowth of European lyrical abstraction, itself challenged by new generations. While the work of US philanthropists and the MoMA international program was able to spark some interest in US culture, film and comics proved far more effective than painting.

<sup>110</sup> Letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the French Ambassador in Washington, concerning the Competition between American Artists Residing in Paris, 6 February 1953, Archives de l’Association française d’Action artistique, Centre des Archives diplomatiques de La Courneuve, 554INVA / 1418.

<sup>111</sup> ‘American Artists Rebuffed in Paris. Judges Can’t Find Enough Pictures for Show’, *New York Herald*, 5 February 1953; See also ‘Après le renvoi de leur exposition, Emotion parmi les peintres américains à Paris’, *France Soir*, 7 February 1953.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Americans in Paris’, *Time Magazine*, 18 April 1955, quoted by Serge Guilbaut, ‘1955: The Year the Gaulois Fought the Cowboy’, *French Studies*, vol.98, 2000, 167-181.

<sup>113</sup> Details of this bad press reception in Europe can be found in the exhibition catalogue *The new American painting, as shown in Eight European countries, 1958-1959*, organized by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, under the auspices of the International Council at the Museum of Modern Art, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1959.

Art historians looking to prove the domination of Abstract Expressionism cite as a last resort the testimonies of artists and curators on the importance of this current for them in their early years: Georg Baselitz in the FRG, Hermann Nitsch in Vienna, Johannes Gachnang in Basel, Ianis Kounellis in Rome, or Niki de Saint Phalle in Paris.<sup>114</sup> These testimonies all date from the 1960s or later, a time when European artists suddenly began to develop an inferiority complex in regards to the United States. Before then, the state of affairs was quite the opposite: Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, Claes Oldenburg looked towards Europe, where the new generations were turning against lyrical abstraction.<sup>115</sup>

### Global, National, Local, Transnational: The Circulatory and Semantic Construction of a Symbolic Artistic Dominance

The ‘American Victory’ would not become a reality until much later than often suggested – certainly not before 1964. The breakthrough of the US avant-garde onto the international art market came in 1963 with the rise of pop art. Pop art was invented in 1962 by a handful of curators and merchants who had been long been looking for something new to replace Abstract Expressionism in the hearts of US amateurs.<sup>116</sup> But first, it needed to establish its legitimacy abroad – what I call a *foreign legitimization* through a *detour abroad*. Starting in 1963, pop art’s key dealers and promoters therefore began to export it towards Europe which, at the time, was very open to artistic innovation, unlike the US, where collectors remained uncertain of pop art’s merit. Pop art’s domestic recognition in the USA came only after it had first found favour amongst European audiences.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall*, 138, quoting Johannes Gachnang, ‘From Continent to Continent’, in Siegfried Gohr and Rafael Jablonka (ed.), *Europa/Amerika — Die Geschichte einer künstlerischen Faszination seit 1940*, Cologne 1986, 337.

<sup>115</sup> Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Naissance de l’art contemporain 1945-1970*.

<sup>116</sup> On the invention of Pop art, see Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall*, 158-168; and in French, Yannick Bréhin, *Minimal et Pop Art. Socio-esthétique des avant-gardes artistiques – Années Soixante* (Bellecombe-en-Bauges : Du Croquant, 2013).

<sup>117</sup> Catherine Dossin, ‘To Drip or to Pop? The European Triumph of American Art’.

It was at this time that the idea of the international power of US art outside of the US' territory was constructed. To look more closely at this phenomenon whereby a 'circulatory capital' is constituted, let us take the example of Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg's 1964 Grand Prix at the Venice Biennial is the centrepiece of the narrative of the USA's symbolic victory. We now know that the attribution of the prize to Rauschenberg was at least in part the result of considerable machinations by Rauschenberg's gallerist Leo Castelli, along with the organizer of the USA Pavilion, Alan Solomon. The pair's thundering declarations in the international press sought to assert the inevitability of the USA's victory over an outmoded Europe, whose avant-gardes had no hope of attaining the lofty heights represented by Rauschenberg and his work.<sup>118</sup> The undeniable quality of Rauschenberg's work was thus extended, by a metonymic sleight of hand, to become that of all US art.

It is worth taking a closer look at Rauschenberg's competition in Venice – the other artists that the juries considered. In fact, by selecting Rauschenberg for the prize, the judges were merely honouring the sole representative at the Biennale of a broader international trend, one which they had supported since its emergence in Europe in the late 1950s, and which was known either as a 'new realism' or a 'post-dadaism'. This was a current that was pursued by avant-gardes in Milan (in particular by Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni, and Enrico Castellani), Paris (notably the New Realism of Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely, Arman, and César), Antwerp (the Nul group), and West Germany (ZERO, SPUR). Rauschenberg had exhibited alongside numerous artists from this generation. Though he had shown work with the Surrealists in 1959, in 1960 he met the Nouveaux Réalistes, and would exhibit and create work with them between Paris and New York. He collaborated particularly closely with Jean Tinguely and Niki de Saint-Phalle,<sup>119</sup> and was

friends with several other Parisian New Realists. He had also been a frequent traveller in Europe since the early 1950s, in defiance of the patriotic isolation of the New York milieu. Like his European contemporaries, Rauschenberg had been inspired by the *matérialisme* of Jean Dubuffet and Alberto Burri, as well as by the heritage of Marcel Duchamp and Dada. He felt out of step with the New York scene and Abstract Expressionism, and his work, along with that of Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly and Claes Oldenburg, stood in defiance of a heroic, individualistic and nationalistic lyrical abstraction. We might also point to Rauschenberg and his cohort's distance from the rather macho and heterosexual social milieu of Abstract Expressionism.<sup>120</sup>

In 1964, Castelli and Solomon carefully presented Rauschenberg's reputation and oeuvre as 'Made in the USA', dutifully backed up by the US press. In reality, though, his work had deployed *against* the grand narrative of 'American' modern art. Indeed, Rauschenberg's was a style which in 1964 had yet to find a place in the canonical story of American modern art. It was in Europe that the reaction against lyrical abstraction found institutions and collectors ready, willing, and able to support it, and it was in Europe that Rauschenberg first enjoyed a warm reception.<sup>121</sup> And yet Rauschenberg's US promoters presented this reception as a sign of the USA's dominance over Europe.

From one side of the Atlantic to the other, then, Rauschenberg's oeuvre underwent a series of re-interpretations which suited the interests of his gallerist and the US pavilion's curator, as they joined the campaign for global cultural dominance. Thanks in part to their efforts, the USA would eventually win this symbolic war, but only at a rather later date than canonical histories tend to indicate. The much vaunted 'victory' truly came to be a reality in the late 1960s, and it was largely the result of the phenomenon of transfer that intensified with the highly publicized export of pop art to Europe

<sup>118</sup> A version of the debate can be found in Annie Cohen-Solal, *Leo Castelli and his Circle*, 333-354.

<sup>119</sup> See for instance Roland Wetzels and Mari Dumett (eds), *Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Tinguely: Collaborations*, exhibition catalogue, Basel, Museum Tinguely, October 2009 – January 2010.

<sup>120</sup> Johnson, Steven (ed.), *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts: John Cage, Morton Feldman, Edgard Varèse, Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>121</sup> In 1964 the Moderna Museet de Stockholm was the first museum to acquire a Rauschenberg.

from 1964 onwards in the wake of Rauschenberg's Venetian coup. As a result, pop art was soon identified as the new national art of the US by those who admired US culture. This new work conveyed an image of a modern, emancipated, young, and dynamic society, and spread internationally as part of the global fascination with the 'American Way of Life' that it seemed to herald. Rauschenberg himself cared little for the New York scene: after 1964, he travelled to Sweden and to Japan, and continued to work with artists that had broken with consensual forms of painting.<sup>122</sup>

As a matter of fact, artists in this period were not necessarily engaged in, or even aware of, a battle surrounding a putative 'American dominance'. Even after 1963-4, the supremacy of the US only concerned those who were interested in a certain market, namely that of the international avant-garde. Many others forged their own vision of a global geopolitics of art according to their own interests. The phenomenon deserves more attention, and could be discussed using the archetypal model of the 'prophet misunderstood in their own land': to succeed at home, artists must always pretend that their work is enjoying a better reception elsewhere.<sup>123</sup> Symbolic superiority is attained through the distancing and rebalancing of cultural geopolitics that can alone generate the right kind of jealousy. As the proverb says, the grass is always greener on the other side: if artists can show (or pretend) that they are being feted in a milieu from which their peers are excluded, they can successfully boost their symbolic capital.

## Conclusion

The "provincialism problem" is primarily the result of the way in which we have been making art history for years – a way that too often lacks global perspectives, is excessively compartmentalized, and which fails to verify commonly accepted truths.

<sup>122</sup> Hiroko Ikegami, *The Great Migrant: Robert Rauschenberg and the Global Rise of American Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2010).

<sup>123</sup> Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, "Nul n'est prophète en son pays"? *L'internationalisation de la peinture avant-gardiste parisienne (1855-1914)*, (Paris : Musée d'Orsay / Nicolas Chaudun, 2009).

It is also the result of a spatiotemporal frame of reference incapable of separating space from a graduated and oriented time line that divides up centres and meridian lines on the one hand and peripheries exiled in the "not yet" on the other. By adopting a transnational, comparative and circulatory approach that begins at the supposed peripheries rather than at the ostensible centre, we come to realize that the 'centre', New York in this case, was not the first to innovate; and that even after 1960, the so-called centrality of the US was far from being a universally accepted notion, if, indeed when the question of centrality was posed at all. When the matter of national pre-eminence was raised, each actor negotiated their centrality according to their own interests and in terms of the national, regional, or international scales that best suited them. Complex dynamics of circulation and resemanticization are at play in artistic dominance, as the supposed victory of purportedly 'American' art at the 1964 Venice Biennial reveals.

This approach allows us to relativize the slogans of ill-informed New York art critics who perpetuated Clement Greenberg's gospel according to which the USA assumed the culturally dominant position formerly held by Europe. A global approach to the history of art features many actors, and shows that it is far from a two-horse race. The USA was not the sole, glorious victor to emerge from a battlefield of past ruins. The triumphant US model was less artistic than it was administrative, financial, and economic; its influence is to be found in some of the museums of modern art founded in the post-war period that were modelled on MoMA. Yet here it was the container that was being imitated, not the content: US institutions, not US art. If we are indeed to speak of US artistic dominance, then we ought to push the start of its rising status back to at least 1964, and recognise that this rise coincided with a range of historiographical simplifications.

A global, transnational, and comparative approach runs the risk of overextending, and subsequently treating specific national or local histories schematically. This is a criticism that must be accepted, just as national histories and monographs run

the risk of generalizing a putative US dominance without verifying it. However, the conclusions of the transnational and comparative approach outlined here corroborate those of scholarship which has examined more specialized reception histories, especially the research of Andrea Giunta, Hiroko Ikegami, Catherine Dossin, Ming Tiampo, and Adriana Ortega Orozco, among many others. The United States were never considered as an artistic centre prior to the 1960s, except by the art world of the United States. It would be no exaggeration to say the only group to believe in this centrality before the 1960s was a minute New York cultural elite, which preferred to ignore the fact that even the collectors and museums of their own country continued to purchase and value the international *École de Paris* over and above anything produced in North America. In the 1950s, the USA was just one of a number of countries looking to steal Europe's mantle in the race for cultural dominance; Mexico was another particularly fierce contender in this struggle. In short, in the global geopolitics of art, everything was still to play for until the 1960s.

As works of art and reputations circulate internationally, they are interpreted in different contexts whose stakes vary massively, and whose diversity has a productive impact on the meaning and significance attached to the work of their artists. Focusing on the actual circulation of objects and on the diversity of discourses which accompanied them across geographic areas can help us to re-inject a degree of complexity and nuance into art history. When we consider the social life of things, we realize that their trajectories are active phenomena which see objects (works of art and by metonymic extension, artists' reputations) progressively accumulate a circulatory capital that contributes to their symbolic valorisation.<sup>124</sup> This process of valorisation proceeds by way of successive resemanticizations, which are themselves enmeshed in logics of social, aesthetic, symbolic, and geopolitical competition.<sup>125</sup>

The actors involved in these processes look to profit from the malleability of concepts and the flexibility of interpretations, from the ignorance of others or from their own informational superiority, and from the polyvocality of artworks themselves. 'Nationality' is a malleable concept, as are 'origin' and 'centrality'. A work of art can be attributed to various geographic and conceptual spaces. By fine-tuning our definitions and our objects of study, by multiplying and globalizing our methods, and by accounting for peripheral sources, circulations and negotiations rather than relying on the press-based sources that are over-represented in our discipline, we can treat matters of 'the periphery' and 'the centre' not as facts, but rather as so many elements of a global geopolitics in a constant state of flux.

<sup>124</sup> Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (London-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>125</sup> Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, 'Circulation and Resemanticization: An Aporetic Palimpsest', *Artl@s Bulletin* 6, no. 2 (Summer 2017), 4-17. URL: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol6/iss2/13>, accessed 29 June 2019.



### Mapping the International Exhibition Program of MoMA from 1952 to 1969 according to time, space, and the type of exhibitions sent abroad.

These maps were created from the list of exhibitions organised by the MoMA's International Exhibition Program available online at <https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/icelist.pdf> (still accessible on December 24, 2020). The screen prints available on this version of the article are accessible in interactive mode on the following url: <http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:147570>

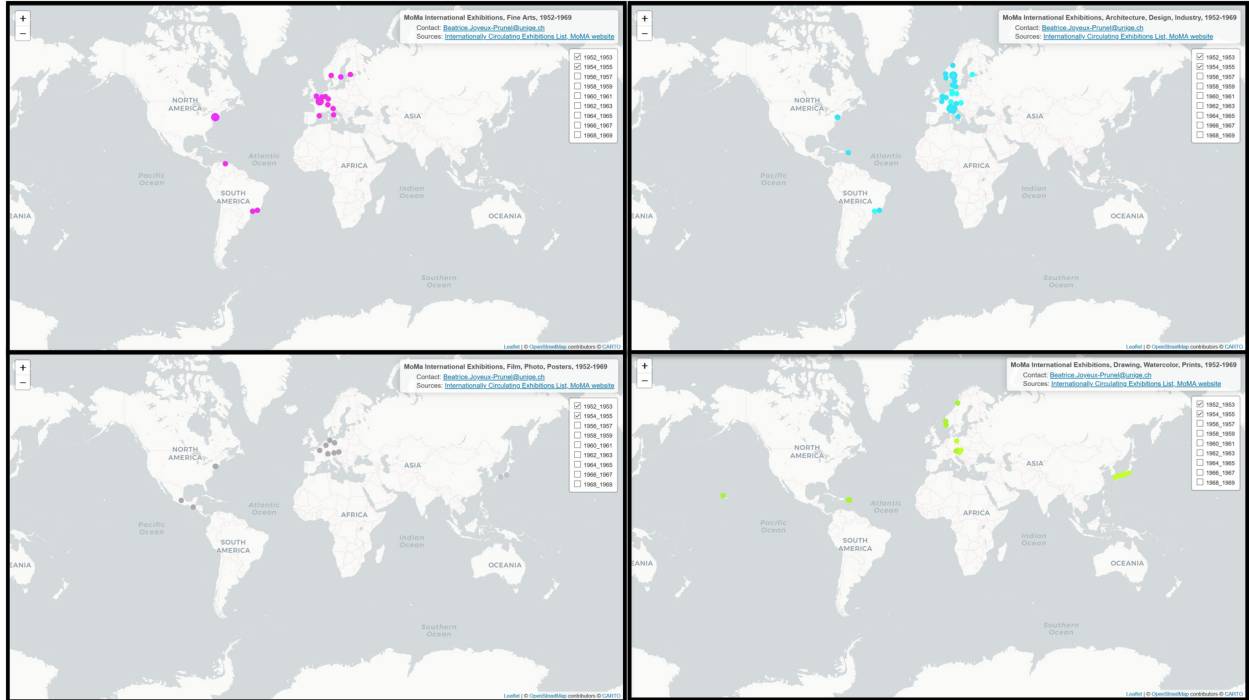


Figure 7a. MoMA's International Exhibitions, 1952-1955

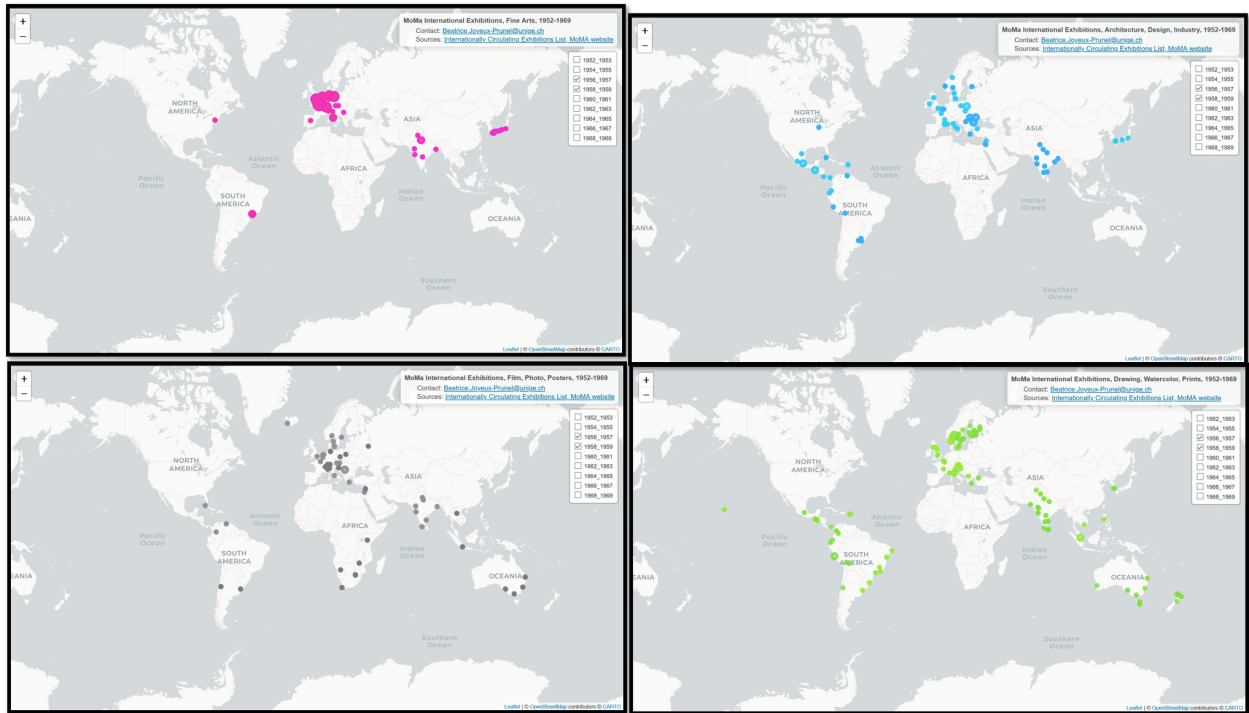


Figure 7b. MoMA's International Exhibitions, 1956-1959

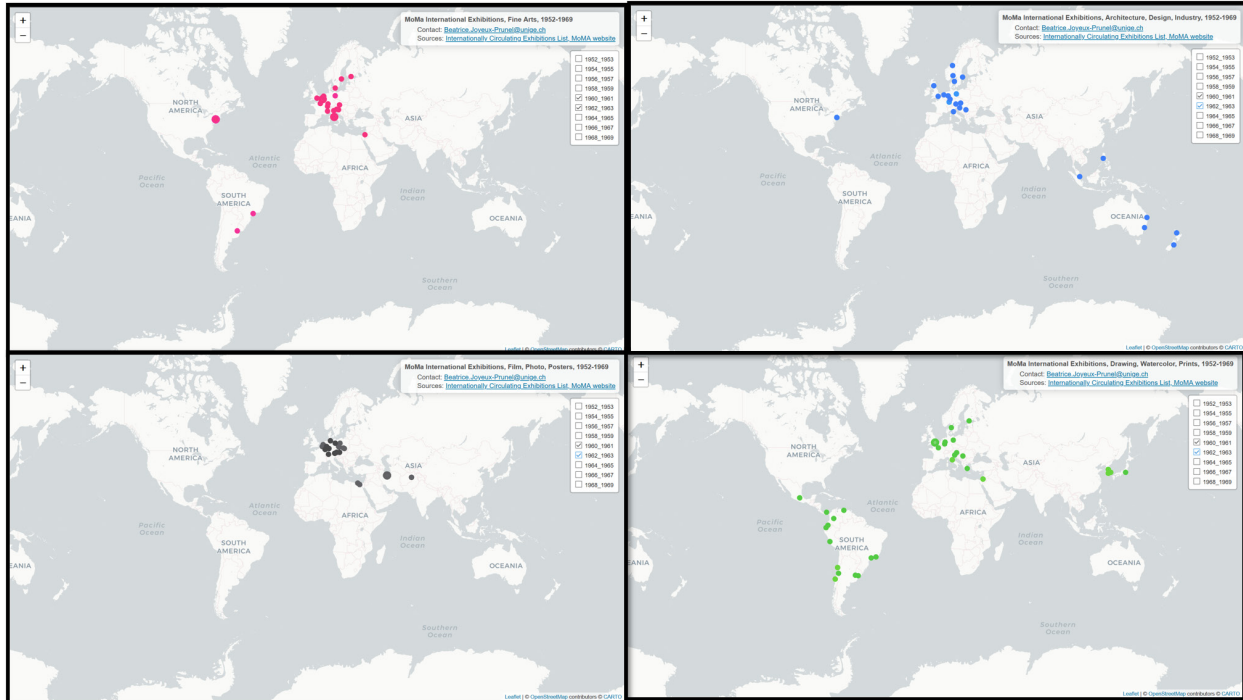


Figure 7c. MoMA's International Exhibitions, 1960-1963

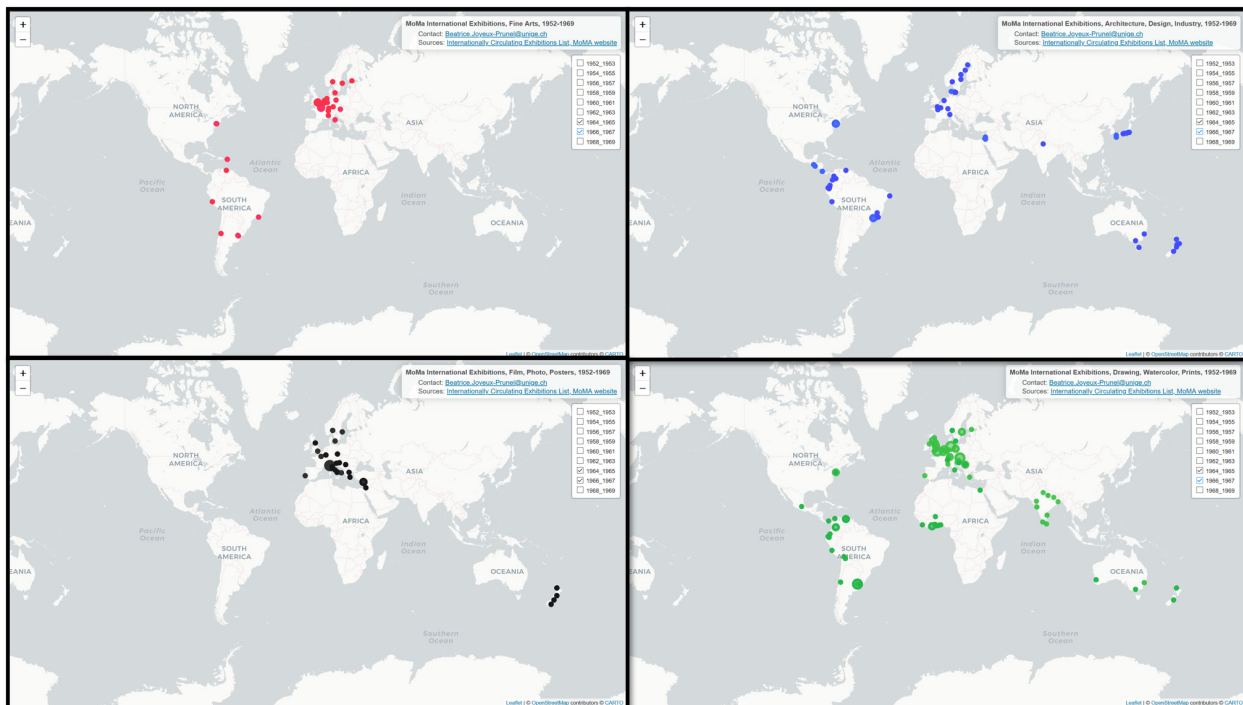


Figure 7d. MoMA's International Exhibitions, 1964-1967

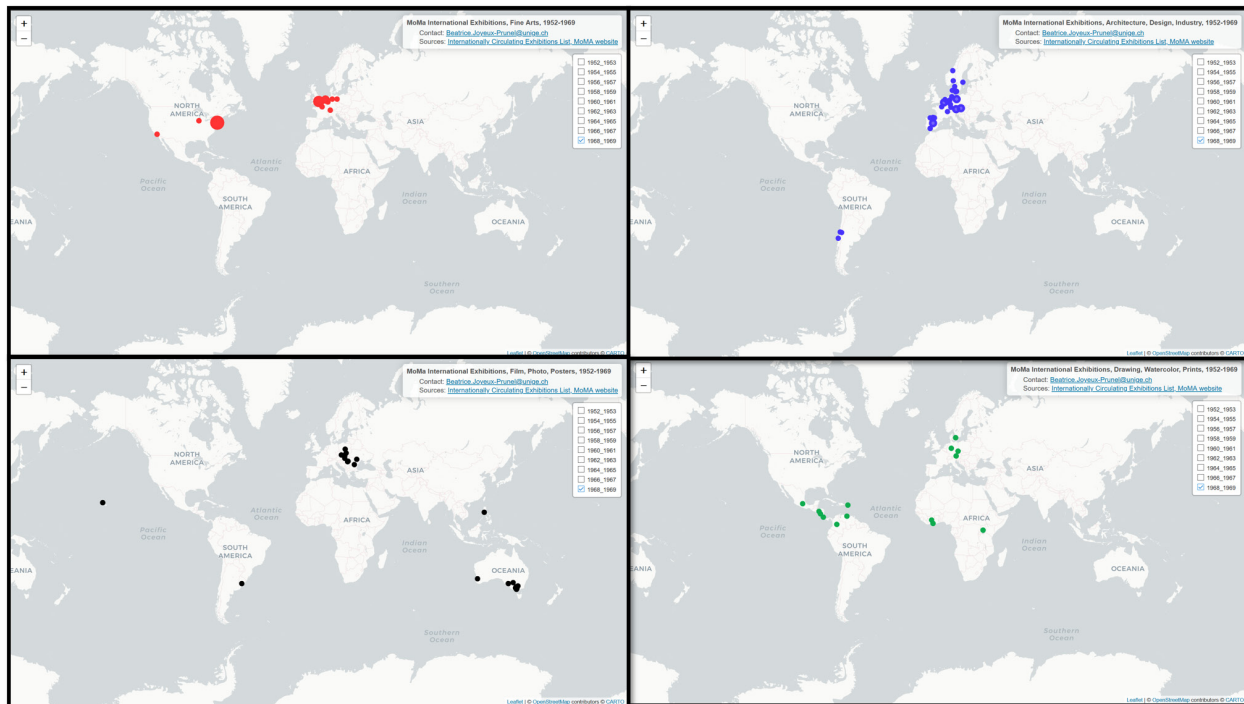


Figure 7e. MoMA's International Exhibitions, 1968-1969