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The Uses and Abuses of Peripheries in Art History

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Peripheries

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

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

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

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The Uses and Abuses of Peripheries in Art History

Global art history and global art are fashionable today, as witnessed by the recent reorganization of the permanent modern collection of the Centre Pompidou in Paris with a so-called *perspective mondiale*, the “global” program of the Guggenheim foundation,¹ a wealth of recent monographic exhibitions canonizing “forgotten” artists from Latin America and Eastern Europe,² and the media celebration in different art fairs and biennials of artists of the peripheries. The idea or purpose—or, more accurately, the claim—is to make space for these peripheries in an art history still overly focused on Paris and New York, especially in regard to modern and contemporary art. Thus, the peripheries—places remote from traditional cultural centers and formerly considered a step behind the avant-garde—are finally given a seat at the table, as it were: a corner or a wall in our museums, a paragraph in world art histories, and maybe an image in our imaginary museums and memories.

This is a noble ambition that, in spite of appearances, has not conquered every museum—the largely European/British emphasis of the Tate

modern website could be an example, in a surprising contrast to the current state of their collection.³ Still, critiques have been expressed against what could be called a wishful thinking that arguably instantiates a neo-colonial art history and criticism. Maintaining a center-periphery logic—even one in which the periphery is now valued equally or even more than the center—produces and keeps the traditional hierarchical canon of art history, preserving the subaltern position of the artistic production of the peripheries while including them in a barely-altered canon—an apparatus producing perennial, obligatory questions. Objects, exhibitions, and personal histories which could be better understood in different conceptual frames thus fit the expectations of a dominant discourse of the “global” that spans the transition between modernity and postmodernity. More precisely, and paradoxically, the introduction of “margins” into mainstream art historical discourse does not escape the fundamental imperative of modernism: to destabilize the canon. The latter strategy has been adopted by recent art historical trends, especially in the field of Latin American art, to destabilize the modern narrative and prove the value of “other” vanguards that supposedly utilized the modernist toolkit more effectively than their counterparts in European and American

¹ See “Modernités plurielles de 1905 à 1970/ Plural Modernities from 1905 to 1970,” Oct. 23, 2013 – January 26, 2015, <http://www.centrepompidou.fr/>; and “Coming Soon”: Middle East and North Africa, <http://www.guggenheim-foundation/collaborations/map> [Accessed May 2014].

² For instance *Sanja Iveković: Waiting for the Revolution*, exhibition at the MUDAM, Luxembourg, June 2-September 16, 2012 (see Christophe Gallois, Enrico Lunghi, and Bojana Pejic, *Sanja Iveković: Lady Rosa of Luxembourg* [Luxembourg: Mudam and Casino Luxembourg, 2012]; *Empty Zones. Andrei Monastyrski and Collective Actions*, exh. cat., New York, E-Flux, November 5, 2011–January 14, 2012, texts by Boris Groys, Claire Bishop, and Andrei Monastyrski, (New York: e-flux, 2012); Cornelia Butler and Luis Pérez-Oramas, eds., *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948–1988*, exh. cat., (New York: MoMA, 2014); Fabrice Hergott ed., *Lucio Fontana, retrospective*, exh. cat. Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris (Paris: Paris Musées, 2014).

³ See <http://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern> [Accessed June 2014] which stands in contrast to the “global” politics of the museum towards academics, with for instance the colloquium « Global Pop », March 13 and 14, 2013, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/conference/global-pop-symposium>, [Accessed June 2014].

historical and neo-avant-gardes. In this strategy, being peripheral has proved to be an asset in the important work of Latin American art specialists who, fighting against the canon (i.e. MoMA, *October*), are now entering it. This strategy is not new. Non-Western Conceptual artists and their supporters from the 1960s through the 1980s, for example, consistently made reference to their regions' peripheral status and specificity in a bid to be integrated into the canon that has proved successful.⁴ Going to the peripheries to incorporate them into art history could be thus considered perfectly trendy, perhaps a concession to art historical leftist political correctness or a sacrifice to the goddesses of “renewal” and “openness.” Art historians like James Elkins have convincingly replied to such gestures with a demonstration of their perfect Westernness and neoliberal orientation.⁵

In a nutshell, the internal contradictions of every attempt to work on artistic peripheries seem difficult to solve. Surprisingly, one of their effects is to shift the accusations long levied against “the canon” and its “Western” institutions (MoMA being always the target) against the defenders of the peripheries, under the pretext that the latter are still maintaining the canon, and even reinforcing it. These contradictions haunt art historians and critics who are sincerely trying to change the mainly European and North-American version of art history, or who might simply like to read, teach and discuss something about new regions and names other than Monet, Matisse, Picasso, Dalí, Duchamp, Rauschenberg, Warhol, or Richter. The aim of this issue is neither to diminish their bad consciousness, nor to re-affirm the dark side of traditional art history and its canon. It is to cast light on the diverse strategies adopted in the last ten years in the hope of writing an art history of and for those peripheral regions where modern and postmodern art happened but was forgotten or disregarded—and to evaluate their effects.

⁴ Sophie Cras, “Global Conceptualism? Cartographies of Conceptual Art in Pursuit of Decentering,” in *Global Artistic Circulations and the History of Art*, edited by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, forthcoming).

⁵ James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (New York; London: Routledge, 2007).

Three strategies can be highlighted. The simplest one, but the most urgent, is to chronicle forgotten histories. Some historians are reconnecting marginal parts of better known artistic networks to their centers, proving that it was not one but several centers which contributed to the movements they study. The task is gigantic, and the examples given here only present a brief idea of what can be done, from Derek Sayer’s focus on Prague, a true capital of 20th century modernism, to Giovanni Rubino’s work on the Yugoslavian and Italian link in so-called “Op art” and the real opportunity it provided or denied to artists at the threshold of the international art scene in the 1960s. Only this first strategy questions the idea of Paris and New York as world capitals of the arts respectively before and after 1960. The “Greenwich meridian” of modernity, to use Pascale Casanova’s expression about literature, was not as accepted as a given but was continually negotiated from one place to the other, especially in the so-called peripheries.⁶ The descriptive or chronological approach also shows that many worlds of art coexisted, each with its own system of reference and value. The space of Communist art after 1945, as sketched by Jérôme Bazin in this issue, can be integrated in an art historical narrative that, despite its very different framework, still communicated with the modern one – be it through ideological concurrence and reciprocal mistrust, or through specific crossings, as shown in the case of the GRAV and New Tendencies in Yugoslavia and Italy (Rubino). Thus, the first task of the art historian, which is to gather sources and reconstruct the history of these forgotten areas, movements, and people, finds here enormous and empty fields of study from the East to the West to the South. This is at the core of the present issue of the *ARTL@S Bulletin*, which tends to focus on Eastern and Southern Europe, and of the following one which will be devoted to Latin American transnational artistic circulations. Forthcoming issues will consider the situation in African and Far-Eastern regions. In this “politics of

⁶ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

the chronicle," archival projects are key to the reevaluation of artistic peripheries. The ICAA Documents Project, for example, gathers primary documents of (now canonical) sources from different Latin American archives, scans them, and puts them online.⁷ Other such projects, however, remain more discreet. We wanted to let them speak, as in the case of the research project hosted by the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte / Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art in Paris (see Mathilde Arnoux's article).⁸

To aid the integration of the peripheries into art history, a second step, once the initial excavations are done, involves a militant or provocative presentation: a cannon against the canon. Sayer's idea of "Prague, capital of the 20th century" participates in this "nettoyage du regard" that some avant-gardes have called for since the sixties (especially the Nouveaux Réalistes, who were witnessing their own rapid peripheralization). The new dimension of this strategy is that it is now used by museum curators, who find their gunpowder not only in artworks, but in an aggressive discourse displayed in manifestos, as shown in this issue by Daniel Quiles on Latin American art. These curators master anti-modernist or postmodern rhetoric and know perfectly how to use the language of postcolonial discourse and deconstruction to reach their target. Some of them, especially Héctor Olea and Mari Carmen Ramírez, director of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, have played a key role in redesigning a coherent field of Latin American art. They have fought for decades to impose its superiority through the affirmation that the region's vanguards produced its most attention-worthy and essential artistic expression. This strategy can be praised or dismissed as a *déjà-vu*, and there seems little alternative to these choices. It can be dismissed as a reproduction of a system that needs new material to continue: time is constructed like an unfolding totality, in a very

similar, or at least symmetrical discourse to the narrative it wants to challenge. Still, this would mean nonetheless changing something in art history and contemporary art. Maybe the structure of the Northern avant-garde narrative, with its core values (innovation, engagement, prejudice against the market), does not change; but if the content changes, there can be hope for new ideas, new narratives, and a plurality of canons. And perhaps there will be place for the idea that what we remember, celebrate, exhibit and canonize changes as quickly as what we forget, and cannot be considered definitive.

The claim of superiority or anteriority for artistic peripheries is not always a feasible position. It does not recognize a simple reality: that one cannot be as "good" as those in the center who decide the rules as to precisely what is "good" or "bad," or even "avant-garde" and "retrograde." It risks overlooking the fact that the regions we want to empower were often cruelly deprived, and that the artists we exhibit today as heroes were in fact uncharacteristically mobile and/or benefitted from generous institutional support that gave them access to developments in the centers. This was the case for an artist such as Marta Minujín, one of the key-figures in Argentine postwar art, who spent several months in Paris in the early 1960s, where she discovered Nouveau Réalisme, happenings, and other neo-avant-garde practices in full swing. There, she realized how the ascendant aesthetics of live art and destruction could be brought back to Argentina, to help her carve out a place for herself in the contemporary scene there.⁹ Focusing on such circulations between so-called peripheries and so-called centers is a much more worthy challenge to traditional art historical categories, since it incites to get out of questions of absolute hierarchies and values. This third strategy of working on artistic peripheries belongs to what Piotr Piotrowski calls "a horizontal art history," in which hierarchies no longer last, or are taken as objects of study and not

⁷ International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Documents of 20th century Latin American and Latino Art – a digital archive and publications project at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, <http://icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/en-us/home.aspx> [Accessed June 2014].

⁸ See also the Forum's website, <http://www.dtforum.org/> [Accessed June 2014].

⁹ Andrea Giunta, *Vanguardia, internacionalismo y política*, trad. anglaise *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties*, translated from Spanish by Peter Kahn (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

as given.¹⁰ Here, the historian focuses on space and circulations before constructing evolutions. Faced with the same problem while introducing his book on Brazilian vanguardism, Sérgio B. Martins formulated this choice very convincingly:

.... the emerging historiography of Brazilian art currently poses a challenge. Is it to become smoothly integrated into the symbolic machinery of art history and of the international curatorial circuit as yet another novelty in the service of the art market and of specialist academic authorities, thus confirming [Guy] Brett's fears about a "boom"? The way Brazilian art tends to be "fielded" (or "subfielded") as part of another problematic field, that of Latin American art, especially in US academia, tends to preclude its interventional power *vis-à-vis* the general historiography of modernism. This is why it is so important to create a dialogue between the Brazilian avant-garde and certain aspects of the European and North American critical debate without simply letting the former be subsumed by the latter.¹¹

Only a transnational and comparative art history can open such horizons.

What, then, does the study of peripheries contribute to art history? In addition to deconstructing or destabilizing the canon, it forces us to abandon certain interpretations of avant-garde as a necessary "rupture." It also incites to complicate our art historical narratives with pragmatic research on what happened, who met whom, where artworks circulated, what was written about them, before giving in to the temptation to demonstrate the superiority of one's subject via simplistic (and often naive) analyses of artworks and discourses. Such options, which are even applicable to artistic centers, open up very different narratives of canonical art history, as is demonstrated by Catherine Dossin's contribution about the international reception of "drip" and "pop" shows. A connected and circulatory approach to art history seems to be the simplest

and least polemical way to give peripheries a sustainable remembrance. This is the main objective of the ARTL@S Project, which gathers a database of global 19th and 20th c. exhibitions and offers the tools necessary for art historians to trace artistic circulations between centers and peripheries.

Marginalization, or the presentation of peripheries as dominated, alienated and inequitably despised and misunderstood—something that the overly dichotomistic logic of center-periphery methods paradoxically reinforces—could be ameliorated through pragmatic, transnational, historical work. The celebration of difference—be it ethnic, cultural, aesthetic, political, or sexual—does not necessarily open real spaces of inclusion and recognition. It is an unconscious investment in the periphery as a desire-production machine (and sometimes a conscious investment, strategic for personal carriers and curatorial success). Embracing the fiction of an essentially marginal subject, it reinforces Western fantasies of "Latin American," or "Eastern European" or "African" otherness, as Achille Mbembe puts it.¹² A transnational approach, on the contrary, could help us think of a way to escape a binary arrangement of the world into *We* and *Others*, regardless of the positive or negative valuation given to either.

¹⁰ Piotr Piotrowski, "Towards a Horizontal Art History", in *Crossing Cultures. Conflict, Migration, and Convergence*, edited by Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2009), 82-85.

¹¹ Sérgio B. Martins, *Constructing an Avant-Garde. Art in Brazil 1949-1979* (Cambridge, Mass.; London, England: the MIT Press, 2013), 7.

¹² Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001) and *Critique de la raison nègre* (Paris: La Découverte [Cahiers libres], 2013).