Monica Juneja

CAN ART HISTORY BE MADE GLOBAL?
Meditations from the Periphery

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When a book has had such an extended gestation period as this one, the trail of accumulated debts is long. In 2009, I took up a position at the University of Heidelberg, ambitiously designated Global Art History. As this was the first and is still the only professorial Chair of this denomination in the German-speaking countries, it was imperative for me to position my work in relation to a fashionable epithet, as well as to outline the possibilities of how such a field of study could be meaningfully delineated. This book represents a fruition and distillation of a theoretical perspective within the disciplinary landscape of art history; it is the result of more than a decade of research, teaching and intellectual exchanges, often across disciplinary divisions.

The outline of the book took shape in 2014, when I was invited by the University of Zurich to deliver the freshly instituted Heinrich Wölfflin Lectures. I am deeply grateful to Tristan Weddigen for inviting me to open the series, thereby providing me with an opportunity to place my initial ideas on the globality of art history for discussion with a lively audience of students, colleagues and museum experts. My thanks also to the Max Kohler Foundation, whose generosity made this possible. A fellowship of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, in the following year enabled me to continue developing the structure of the work and flesh out arguments following enriching exchanges with colleagues at the Institute. My sincere gratitude to Thomas Gaehtgens, Alexa Sekyra and the wonderful staff at the Getty for helping to make my term there so productive. A further opportunity to continue researching and writing came with a fellowship of the Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin for which I am grateful to Gerhard Wolf and Hannah Baader, who ran the Art Histories and Aesthetic Practices programme of the Forum with exemplary imagination and commitment. Not least, I am greatly indebted to the Volkswagen Foundation for honouring me with an Opus Magnum award that allowed me to take a year off from routine professional obligations and complete the book manuscript. A special word of thanks to Vera Szöllösi-Brenig and Silvia Birck for their support and flexibility through difficult pandemic times.

During the past years, as the initial lectures grew into more extensively researched and theoretically fine-tuned chapters, I have benefited from vital exchanges with innumerable colleagues, as well as the support of various institutions. Interlocutors whose insights and

own work sustained the project, helping it refine its arguments, are numerous. A partial list includes (in alphabetical order) Naman Ahuja, Hans Belting, Susanna Burghartz, Manuela Ciotti, Sebastian Conrad, Annie Coombes, Burcu Dogramaci, Eva Ehninger, Larissa Förster, Atreyee Gupta, Kajri Jain, Christian Kravagna, Susanne Leeb, Saloni Mathur, Birgit Meyer, Parul Dave Mukherji, Ruth Phillips, Dhruv Raina, Sugata Ray, Chaitanya Sambrani, Indra Sengupta, Kavita Singh, Sujit Sivasundaram, Tristan Weddigen, Roland Wenzlhuemer, Gerhard Wolf and Karin Zitzewitz. My collaboration of many years with Sumathi Ramaswamy has been enriching and an enormous pleasure. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Claire Farago for inspiring my work through her own incisive writing; to her and Donald Preziosi my heartfelt thanks for stimulating conversations, encouraging feedback on the manuscript, and not least steady friendship.

Research initiatives and collaborative projects with museums have been an important plank of my practice as an art historian. I am particularly grateful to the members of our transatlantic research initiative 'Worlding Public Cultures. The Arts and Social Innovation' (WPC) funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) for intellectual solidarity during apocalyptic times. A special word of thanks to the Heidelberg WPC team – Eva Bentcheva, Franziska Kaun, Seung Hee Kim, Franziska Koch, Costina Mocanu, Miriam Oesterreich and Moritz Schwörer – as well as to Paul Goodwin, Birgit Hopfener, Wayne Modest and Ming Tiampo for lively, often controversial, exchanges. It has been a privilege and a learning experience to work with museums on exhibition projects and new practices of curation that seek to bridge the gap between the university and the museum. My gratitude goes to the dedicated team of curators at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein Westfalen in Düsseldorf with whom I collaborated on the exhibition project 'Museum global. Mikrogeschichten einer ex-zentrischen Moderne' funded by the Kulturstiftung des Bundes. My association of many years with the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (State Art Collections of Dresden, in short SKD) in the context of the projects 'Europa-Welt', the exhibition 'Miniatur Geschichten', as well as the institution of a Transcultural Academy has shaped much of my thinking on the mutually fructifying relationship between a theory of transculturation and creative practices of curating. A special word of gratitude here to Hartwig Fischer, whose idealistic vision was seminal to the start of my collaboration with the SKD. I am also extremely grateful to Marion Ackermann, Stephanie Buck, Noura Dirani, Petra Kuhlmann-Hodick, Léontine Meijer van Mensch, Friedrich von Bose, and Anne Vieth for our exciting work together. Artists and their work have been vital to many of the ideas developed in this book, interacting with them on a personal level has been a unique experience. My warm thanks to Atul Bhalla, Sheba Chhachhi and Pushpamala N., as well as to Atul Dodiya, for generously allowing me to use their work. The latter's memorable installation *Meditation (with Open Eyes)* that features on the cover of this book captures much of its spirit. All along the process of its making, different chapters of the book were presented in innumerable public lectures and keynote addresses in Germany and across the world. Though too numerous to list individually, I am grateful to every one of my hosts for their hospitality and to the audiences whose questions often remained with me for long and helped sharpen the critical edges of the book.

INTRODUCTION
CAN ART HISTORY BE MADE GLOBAL?

'[G]rounded theory … is a reflexive theory, a theory of how "history" is humanly produced not as an essence, but as openness-to-contingency.' – Achille Mbembe[1]

The Elusive 'Global'

Three words are most frequently used to designate the habitation of humanity: globe, world, planet. Though they often appear interchangeably, each has a distinct conceptual valence. The first two have a longer history within scholarly parlance in the humanities, notably since the early phases of modern globalisation. The conception of the Earth as planet, on the other hand, has gained ground more recently, with a mounting consciousness of the climate crisis, wherein humanity counts as but one member of a composite species encompassing all elements of the biosphere – animals, plants, minerals.[2] While scholars have only just begun to chart the spatiotemporal terrain of 'planetary humanities',[3] the 'global turn' in several disciplines was announced some three decades ago, as a response to the challenges of an increasingly networked world. The term 'global' derives its significance from an abstraction that serves to describe a space on which globalisation plays itself out, imagined as a surface, a sphere, a zone of networks and mobility, whose potential could unfold anywhere. In contrast, the 'world' stands for an inhabited place, spells situatedness, is marked by lived features, memories, relationships that provide a context, while they undergo change, prompt mobility or restrict it, and even produce exile. Worlds are plural – we are born into one, may engage it, retreat from it or move to another one; worlds may collide, collaborate, or collapse. The

---

1   Achille Mbembe, 'Theory from the Antipodes: Notes on Jean & John Comaroffs' TFS', Society for Cultural Anthropology, Fieldsights, 25 February 2012, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/theory-from-the-antipodes-notes-on-jean-john-comaroffs-tfs.

2   Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021; Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller, *Anthropozän zur Einführung*, Hamburg: Junius, 2019.

3   Chakrabarty, ibid; Hannes Bergthaller and Peter Mortensen (eds), *Framing the Environmental Humanities*, Leiden: Brill, 2019. A discussion of how the term 'planet' informed art history and exhibition practice at the onset of the 'global turn' follows in Chapter Five. The Postscript signals to its potential for carrying the discussion further.

imagination of a world imparts agency, for humans can create life-worlds, worlds of signification, they can engage in world-making as a reflexive exercise to produce knowledge, to conceptualise and shape praxis, not least its unfolding within scholarly disciplines.[4]

To address the question posed in the title of this book, we need to begin by attending to the etymological and iconic underpinnings that have fashioned popular and scholarly imaginations of the global. Cultural articulations of a 'globalised' Earth have touched the depths of individual and social consciousness and thereby informed the explanatory power of the term in shifting, often contradictory ways. Global (and its cognate globalism) draws its valence from globe – at once an abstract form and an iconic object – to generate a distinct set of associations. The abstraction of spherical geometry renders the globe overwhelmingly visual and graphic, even poetic, in view of its mathematical perfection, qualities that have unfailingly lent their charge to euphoric images of globalisation. The Earth as spherical orb, photographed for the first time from outer space by astronauts who had set out to study the moon, became the key visual to transmit the ideals of unity and de-territorialised spatiality. Photographs of the terraqueous globe, labelled 'whole earth' or 'blue planet', effectively replaced the mushroom cloud as circulating icon par excellence of a post-Cold War, globally connected world.[5] Though a product of the Apollo space mission of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) during the 1960s and early 1970s, images of planet Earth acquired their highest popularity a quarter of a century later, through ubiquitous reproduction and circulation as an affectively charged visualisation of globalisation after 1989. The elated responses to such pictures were no doubt inspired by the persuasive mimetic power of modern photography; yet as a reassuring image of universal holism, the earthly disk draws upon and extends ideas of human territoriality that have deep historical roots in imaginations of several world cultures.[6]

Our access to the 'global' therefore has been enabled by its representation as abstract form. Its lack of cartographic specificity coupled with the absence of human presence frees the representation of contingency; its untrammelled rotational dynamism makes it a useful metaphor for a contemporary imperium of financial networks and communication lines drawn

4   Writings on the subject are extensive and come from different disciplinary positions, see for example, 'The World and World-Making in Art', theme issue, ed. Caroline Turner and Michelle Antoinette, *Humanities Research*, vol. XIX (2), 2013; Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016; Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978; Arno Schubbach, 'Das Bilden der Bilder: Zur Theorie der Welterzeugung und ihrer bildtheoretischen Verpflichtung', *Soziale Systeme*, vol. 18 (1–2), 2012: 69–93. See also my discussion in Monica Juneja, '"A Very Civil Idea" … Art History, Transculturation, and World-Making – With and Beyond the Nation', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 81 (4), 2018: 461–85, here 463–64.

5   Of these, the photograph christened *Marble Earth*, alternatively *The Blue Marble* (Plate 1.0), is among the most frequently reproduced; very recently, it featured on the cover of Hildegund Amanshauser and Kimberly Bradley (eds), *Navigating the Planetary*, Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2020.

6   A study of the globe within the cosmography of Western civilizations is Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; for an investigation of the journeys of this iconic image and object in South Asia, Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Terrestrial Lessons: The Conquest of the World as Globe*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

across an unbounded spherical unit. And yet, the inherent iconic power of a global icon was not without ambiguity, for it could as well be re-appropriated to contest the illusion it was meant to transport, that of unrestrained harmony in a globally networked world. The globe itself, as form and object, recurs in the work of contemporary artists to draw attention to the darker side of its universalising language. The artist Mona Hatoum (b. 1952), for instance, deploys it in her work *Hot Spot* (2009): a spherical steel-cage, made to tilt at the same angle as the Earth, with burning red neon lights forming the outlines of the continents across its surface. Conflict, to paraphrase the artist, is no longer contained within borders of individual states, but has set the whole world 'ablaze'. The cage, at the same time a legible cartographic representation, here evokes the opposite of heady freedom invoked by enthusiasts of globalisation, to speak instead of global conflict as a mode of incarceration.[7] Denis Cosgrove, in turn, cites the photomontages of the artist Peter Kennard (b. 1949), which dramatically blend the NASA photograph of the 'whole Earth' with objects such as nuclear missiles, living trees, or a human foetus, harnessing the image to pressing global issues of militant nationalisms, war and environmental degradation.[8] And finally, an anecdote that signals the easy slippage from a global to a national imaginary: in 1984, when Rakesh Sharma, the first Indian citizen to travel into space on a Soviet Soyuz T spacecraft, was asked by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, about how it felt to look at India from outer space, he quipped 'Saare jahan se achcha' (The best nation of the world), the title of a popular patriotic song based on a poem by Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), and composed under colonial rule.[9] This handful of examples gives us a sense of the plural imaginaries of the 'global'; it also serves as a set of signposts, which mark the field of art history, aptly described by Donald Preziosi as a panoptic project, now confronting the challenges of the 'global turn' in the humanities and social sciences.[10] Contestations over a globalised art and art history unfold along two discursive axes: the emancipatory rhetoric of globalisation that eulogises a borderless world and its networks of cosmopolitanism, and the heavy footprint of the nation-state whose adherence to retrospectively invented and imposed tradition continues to frame the production and organisation of knowledge, conceptually as well as institutionally.

This monograph enters a field already densely populated with investigations and positions about what it means to write a globally framed art history and seeks thereby to make belatedness productive by refiguring the discourse from a fresh perspective.[11] It takes as its

---

7   See 'Mona Hatoum – Hot Spot' [video], YouTube (uploaded 4 October 2016), www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVyT8_0woj0, accessed 20 Aug. 2021.

8   Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye*, 261–62; see also the website of Peter Kennard, https://www.peterkennard.com/photomontage, accessed 20 Aug. 2021.

9   'Rakesh Sharma', Wikipedia (last modified 8 May 2022), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rakesh_Sharma, accessed 20 Aug. 2021.

10 Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

11 The numerous interventions till now consist mainly of articles and anthologies, with relatively few monographs. They map an amorphous field, extraordinarily difficult to demarcate or define. An issue with edited volumes that saps the coherence of their overall scholarly impact is that editors are not necessarily able to carry contributing authors with them along the same path, though this in turn depends

on the degree of conceptual clarity with which the project was defined to start with. An overwhelmingly large number of writings that engage with the global turn in art history focuses exclusively on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The following list, though not exhaustive, provides a general orientation: James Elkins (ed.), *Is Art History Global?* New York: Routledge, 2007; James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska and Alice Kim (eds), *Art and Globalization*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010; Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel (eds), *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007; Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (eds), *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets and Museums*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009; Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel (eds), *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011; Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme (eds), *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008; David Carrier, *A World Art History and its Objects*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008; Jonathan Harris (ed.), *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011; Marsha Meskimmon, *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination*, London: Routledge, 2011; Jill H. Casid and Aruna D'Souza (eds), *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014; Marcus Verhagen. *Flows and Counterflows: Globalisation in Contemporary Art*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017; Sara Dornhof, Nanne Buurman, Birgit Hopfener and Barbara Lutz (eds), *Situating Global Art: Topologies – Temporalities – Trajectories*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018; Julia Allerstorfer and Monika Leisch-Kiesl (eds), *'Global Art History': Transkulturelle Verortungen von Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017; 'Art History and the Global Challenge', theme issue, *Artl@as Bulletin*, vol. 6 (1), 2017. The recent questionnaire created by George Baker and David Joselit, editors of *October*, frames its questions in relation to 'global modernisms and global contemporary art' and invites scholars located exclusively in the Anglo-American academy, see 'Questionnaire on Global Methods', *October*, 180 (1), 2022: 3–80.

A few welcome departures from the presentist framing of the studies cited above are: Daniel Savoy (ed.), *The Globalization of Renaissance Art: A Critical Review*, Leiden: Brill, 2017; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin and Beatrice Joyeux-Prunel (eds), *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishers, 2015; Mary D. Sheriff (ed.), *Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art since the Age of Exploration*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012; Dana Leibsohn and Jeanette F. Peterson (eds), *Seeing Across Cultures in the Early Modern World*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishers, 2012; Christine Göttler and Mia Mochizuki (eds), *The Nomadic Object: The Challenge of World for Early Modern Religious Art*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2018.

An exemplary collection, path-breaking for its time, is Claire J. Farago (ed.)*, Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450–1650*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. See also Farago's critique of the 'global turn's' exclusive focus on the contemporary, 'The "Global Turn" in Art History: Why, When, and How Does it Matter?', in: Savoy (ed.), *The Globalization of Renaissance Art*, pp. 299–313.

A useful view from Eastern Europe, a region treated as marginal in accounts that speak from a North-Atlantic axis, is Piotr Piotrowski, 'Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde', in: Sascha Bru and Peter Nicholls (eds), *European Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 49–58.

Among positions from a non-European perspective are Parul D. Mukherji, 'Whither Art History in a Globalizing World', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 96 (2), 2014: 151–55; Cheng-hua Wang, 'A Global Perspective on Eighteenth-Century Chinese Art and Visual Culture', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 96 (4), 2014: 379–94; Atreyee Gupta, 'Art History and the Global Challenge: A Critical Perspective', *Artl@as Bulletin*, vol. 6 (1), 2017: 20–25; Sugata Ray, 'Introduction: Translation as Art History', *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 48, 2018: 1–19; Alessandra Russo, 'Light on the Antipodes: Francisco de Holanda and an Art History of the Universal', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 102 (4), 2020: 37–65; Melanie Trede, Mio Wakita and Christine Guth (eds), *Japanese Art – Transcultural Perspectives*, Leiden: Brill (forthcoming 2023).

While this book was in the making, I published some articles exploring the challenges and possibilities of a global approach – conceptualised as transcultural – to art history. These served as a sounding board of sorts for several ideas that have been developed more extensively and grounded empirically in this book. See Monica Juneja, 'Global Art History and the 'Burden of Representation', in: Belting, Birken et al. (eds), *Global Studies*, pp. 274–97; Monica Juneja, 'Kunstgeschichte und kulturelle Differenz: eine Einleitung', theme issue, 'Universalität in der Kunstgeschichte', Matthias Bruhn, Monica Juneja and Elke A. Werner (eds), *Kritische Berichte*, vol. 40 (2), 2012: 5–12; Monica Juneja, '"A Very Civil Idea" …'. Some of the key

starting point the paradox expressed pithily by Stephen Greenblatt: 'one of the characteristic powers of a culture is its ability to hide the mobility that is its enabling condition'.[12] While Greenblatt was writing a manifesto for a scholarly field now known as mobility studies, his insightful observation directs our attention to rethinking the processuality of culture. The theory of transculturation that vitally informs my understanding of the global develops this idea by attending to how the 'cultural' is radically made and remade: in processes of interaction with other units, not by necessity contained within the territorial fixtures of the nation-state. Transculturation as a process designates those long-term transformative relationships between cultural entities that follow from encounters and are constitutive for the actors, practices and epistemic configurations implicated. When distilled to furnish a set of explanatory principles, it partakes of those attributes of a 'grounded theory', described by Achille Mbembe in the opening epigraph to this chapter. This distinct ontology of culture, I will show in the following sub-section of this chapter, is equipped with a critical potential that enables us to dismantle the core of a discipline – art history in this case – rather than dealing with examples on its fringes. The theoretical force of the transcultural allows us to circumvent the conceptual traps of a facile globalism, whose trajectories and limits I will first elucidate in the following paragraphs.

The tension between the idea of the global and the nation-state referred to above is particularly palpable in the domain of culture. When framed within the space of the nation, culture is invariably conscripted to attributes such as stability, linguistic homogeneity and authenticity; belonging to the nation rests on valorising containment and consensus, and ends up concealing the turbulences that are constitutive of all culture. While the subjects investigated by art historians – artists, objects, pictorial/artisanal practices and canons on the one hand, museal displays and exhibitions, curators, patrons and collectors on the other – have all had mobile histories across the centuries, the disciplinary frameworks and institutional settings of art history have been constituted according to fixed and stable units such as the nation-state or civilisational entities dating to the nineteenth century. In what today has the appearance of a single world that has discarded its former tripartite division, the intimate connection between art and national identity retains its hold over imaginations in varying, though mutually constitutive ways. Art history as a modern scholarly field cannot plausibly be viewed as a purely 'Western' discipline, for it no longer retains an exclusively 'originary' attachment to its parochial beginnings in Europe; during its global journeys to other regions of the world it has acquired new roots and undergone adaptations and reconfigurations responding to local and regional contingencies.[13] Many of the young postcolonial nations of Asia and Africa, joined today by the younger post-Cold War nations of Eastern Europe

---

questions and arguments developed in this last, most recent article, have been recapitulated in this Introduction.

12 Stephen Greenblatt, 'A Mobility Studies Manifesto', in: Stephen Greenblatt, Ines Zupanov et al. (eds), *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 250–53, here p. 252.

13 The assumption that art history is a quintessentially 'Western' discipline that sits uneasily in contexts beyond the realm of Europe and North America underlies much of the writing on global/world art history.

and Central Asia, all seek to define national identity through notions of unique civilisational achievement. The practice of disciplines in the humanities is closely tied to identity formations around the nation: this has meant that the nation is the unit of analysis; a narrative of its unique achievements, past and present, explained almost entirely from within, is transmitted through its institutions – the university, the museum, the archive and the heritage industry. For those 'latecomers' in the race for nationhood, art bearing national labels remains an effective way of catching up with the present.

A central concern of this book is to examine the challenges posed by ongoing discussions of the tangled relationship between nations and cultures to art history and its institutional practices, as these debates urge us to develop new frameworks for scholarship. More specifically, how does art history negotiate the tension between national identity and such relationships that break out of national frames and inform memories and visions of so much of artistic production? When art is made to stand for or express allegiance to the nation, what does the art historical life of that entity embody at any given moment in the past and the present? Have art and artists been able to outline different modes of engaging with the idea of the nation? This book takes an approach that deviates from such endeavours of global studies, which by virtue of their very definition and self-positioning seek to transcend and transgress national space and scale as an analytical category. Instead, it aims to use the uneven and at times seemingly divergent regional valences and histories of the 'national' as a wedge to break open the idea of the nation. Conventionally characterised as a juridical, geopolitical entity, can the nation instead be conceived of as an imagined conceptual realm? In other words, can art history recuperate a vision of the nation as a domain not territorially bounded, but one that in the imagination of artists and scholars could both be local and transgress boundaries? The case studies investigated here explore the more complex dynamic between a critique of the national as a constricting ideological frame and the artistic uses of its past role as a ground of emancipation, especially in the histories of postcolonial nations. At the same time, emergent right-wing nationalisms at a global level have drawn attention to the congruence of globalisation and nationalism, to the persistence of the nation-state in politically and economically uneven globalisations of the present. The need for theorising the ambivalent relationship between globalisation and nationalism has assumed an urgency, also in view of contemporary populism of different shades across the political spectrum having become highly culturalised.

The years following the dramatic events of 1989 saw the formation of a domain of contemporary art as a system incarnating the cultural logic of globalisation together with its values of internationalism and multiculturalism.[14] The proliferation of biennials, art fairs,

---

See most recently, James Elkins, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing: North Atlantic Art History and its Alternatives*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021.

14 Like all chronological signposts, 1989 has not met with consensus. Some diverging positions are: Ruth Simbao, 'What "Global Art" and Current (Re)turns Fail to See: A Modest Counter-narrative of "Not-another-Biennial"', *Image and Text*, vol. 25 (1), 2015: 261–86; Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (eds), *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017; Michaela Ott, 'Die

and mega-exhibitions, accompanied by an expanding art viewing public, artists' residencies and itinerant curators in and beyond Euro-America, brought forth a characterisation of the 'global contemporary' as a freely circulating, ahistorical, non-situated and economically exploitable mass.[15] Since then, however, it has become necessary to shift the discussion of the 'contemporary' from the issue of visibility gained by art produced in distant corners of the world within the exhibition circuits and scholarly accounts of the 'mainstream' North-Atlantic West, to querying the conditions that make such visibility possible.[16] The new geo-aesthetic maps of globally networked 'artworlds'[17] that figured prominently in the Karlsruhe exhibition curated by Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg cannot be read as an unproblematic dissolution of hierarchies without examining the nature of relationalities that connect the luminous nodal points distributed across the surface of cartographic representation. The euphoria over the forces of globalisation expressed in the writings of the early 1990s that celebrated an effortless, even naturalised 'flow' of materials, goods, capital and human resources together with dissolving national and cultural boundaries, has given way in the new millennium to critiques of neoliberal economics and politics, the disregard of human sovereignty and evasion of environmental responsibility. The present conjuncture has generated a call for critical epistemologies within the humanities to empower a rethinking of the global in the domain of art, and its theorisation as a new 'cosmopolitics of resistance', as a resource for countering the logic of neoliberal capital and neo-nationalist cultural politics.[18] Some key questions for art historians might be: Must a global art history follow the logic of economic globalisation, or does it call for an alternative conception of globality to be able to effectively theorise relationships of connectivity that encompass disparities as well as contradictions and negotiate multiple subjectivities of the actors involved? What are the choices available to artistic producers to negotiate between complicity with or dependence on global capital and critical initiatives that foster transcultural modes of co-production and

kleine ästhetische Differenz', *Texte zur Kunst*, vol. 23, 2013: 101–9. A detailed discussion of this issue follows in Chapter Four below.

15   Hans Belting, 'Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate', in: Belting and Buddensieg (eds), *The Global Art World*, 38–73. See also the catalogue of the exhibition curated by Belting and Buddensieg at the ZKM Karlsruhe from September 17, 2011 to February 19, 2012, *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel (eds), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013.

16   Discussed in Juneja, 'Global Art History and the "Burden of Representation"'.

17   The term comes from Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61 (19), 1964: 571–84.

18   The expression is Athena Athanasiou's, see 'Formations of Political-Aesthetic Criticality: Decolonizing the Global in Times of Humanitarian Viewership: Athena Athanasiou in Conversation with Simon Sheikh', in: Paul O'Neill, Simon Sheikh, Lucy Steeds and Mick Wilson (eds), *Curating After the Global: Roadmaps for the Present*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017, pp. 71–94, here p. 76. Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues for a faultline within globalisation(s) and urges that we distinguish between 'hegemonic … and counter-hegemonic globalization'. He uses the term 'insurgent cosmopolitanism' to designate a 'transnationally organized resistance' against inequalities and unevenness within processes of globalization that result in ecological damage and the destruction of livelihoods, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 'Globalizations', *Theory, Culture & Society*, theme issue, Problematizing Global Knowledge, vol. 23 (2–3), 2006: 393–99.

sustainability? How can art history enable us to view the historical present as a simultaneity of clashing and conjoining temporalities constituted by their pre-histories?[19] How does it handle issues of commensurability or its absence among cultures? How can it translate intellectual resources and insights of regional experiences beyond Euro-America into globally intelligible analyses?

One of the challenges facing these unresolved questions is the extreme slipperiness of the label 'global' itself, an attribute that derives from the term's etymological and iconic roots; notoriously over-used, it remains as contested as it can be vacuous. Signifying an encompassing quality, the global is beset by the problem of any totalising concept: the claim to an easy universalism that threatens to foreclose more nuanced explorations of the cultural field. Within art history the epithet 'global' has been used in multiple, often inconsistent, ways, as for instance to characterise art history as a discipline to be practised uniformly across the globe, one that would subsume 'local' art. Alternatively, it signals towards an inclusive discipline – also labelled world art history – that would encompass different world cultures and their canons, or one that searches for the lowest common denominator to hold together humans across time and space who have been making art for millennia 'because our biological nature has led us to do so'.[20] The term is equated at times with conceptual imperialism, at others with multicultural eclecticism.[21] Hans Belting's definition of 'global art' to characterise those contemporary artistic productions emanating from the non-Western world, which become publicly accessible through exhibitions and mega-shows, continues to inform most discussions on what could define the contours of a global art history, namely a focus on art worlds post 1989.[22] And yet the popularity of this definition overlooks not only its presentism, but also its Eurocentric premises: for art from 'elsewhere' to be recognised as global it must depend on the exclusive agency of Western curators, exhibition sites and publics, who accord (or deny) it this status. The dependence, in turn, becomes a drive towards producing a kind of art that might then be considered global. Globality in this understanding, an attribute to be constituted within and transmitted by a work through an interlinked set of agencies, con-

---

19 The discussion of alternate temporalities as resources for resisting and subverting Western teleological time goes back to Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. Bruno Latour refers to a temporality in which the contemporary is located 'along a spiral rather than a line … the future takes the form of a circle expanding in all directions, and the past is not surpassed, but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled. … Such a temporality does not oblige us to use the labels "archaic" or "advanced", since every cohort of contemporary elements may bring together elements from all times.' Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 75.

20 John Onians, Introduction', in: John Onians (ed.), *Atlas of World Art*, London: King, 2004, pp. 10–13, here p. 11. For a more extensive discussion of these positions, see Juneja, 'Global Art History', pp. 278–80.

21 A recent survey of the field undertaken by Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel attempts to bring together innumerable strands under a single label, and in the process reveals the unwieldy, hold-all quality of the domain now designated as 'Global Art History'. The problem is partly due to indiscriminate selection by the author who pays little attention to frameworks of enquiry. See Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, 'Art History and the Global: Deconstructing the Latest Canonical Narrative', *Journal of Global History*, vol. 14 (3), 2019: 413–35.

22 Belting, 'Contemporary Art as Global Art'.

tributes to cementing a hierarchical division of the world between what Gerardo Mosquera aptly calls 'cultures that curate' and those which 'get curated'.[23] The challenge therefore is to formulate a paradigm of the global that does not collapse into hegemonic localisms, but remains plural and multi-sited.

Taking a cue from the more extensive developments in the adjoining fields of global and world histories (again, terms frequently used interchangeably),[24] art historians too have begun to identify new paradigms to be able to adequately deal with multiple, dynamic and at the same time uneven transactions across space. Their aim is 'to provide an interface that is truly relational, connecting interlocked, even if potentially disparate, points in the globe'.[25] Mobility and migration studies, geo-histories of art, as well as network analysis are among the approaches informing studies whose focus has shifted from the 'stasis of nations and civilizations'[26] to the investigation of multidirectional networks, of encounter and exchange, migration and mobile materiality, to name some of the thematic categories of recent art histories.[27] Circulation, flow, transfer, translation, network, connectivity, cultural brokers, are

23 Gerardo Mosquera, 'Some Problems in Transcultural Curating', in: Jean Fisher (ed.), *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, London: Kala Press, 1994, pp. 133–39, here p. 133.

24 Writings of historians from Germany, however, broadly distinguish between the two, as Jürgen Osterhammel points out: while global history is conceived of as an investigation of connectivity, practitioners of world history continue to work in an earlier 'history of civilisations' framework. As a broad field, global history accommodates different approaches and 'types'; what they share in common 'is an approach to the past that is non-Eurocentric and focussed on long-distance connectivity across national and cultural boundaries'. See Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Global History and Historical Sociology', in: James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz and Chris Wickham (eds), *The Prospect of Global History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 23–43, here p. 31.
Some recent publications that define the field from a range of positions are, Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017; Maxine Berg (ed.), *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the 21st Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; Margrit Pernau, *Transnationale Geschichte*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2011; Lynn A. Hunt, *Writing History in a Global Era*, New York: Norton, 2014; Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Flughöhe der Adler: Historische Essays zur globalen Gegenwart*, Munich: C. H. Beck, 2017. A seminal early work on pre-modern globalisation is Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Beyond European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

25 Diana Sorensen, 'Editor's Introduction: Alternative Geographic Mappings for the Twenty-First Century', in: Diana Sorensen (ed.), *Territories and Trajectories: Cultures in Circulation*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 13–31, here p. 24.

26 Sorensen, ibid, p. 21.

27 See for instance DaCosta Kaufmann et al. (eds), *Circulations in the Global History of Art*; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Elizabeth Pilliod (eds), *Time and Place: The Geohistory of Art*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005; Sheriff (ed.), *Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art since the Age of Exploration*; Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Les avant-gardes artistiques 1918–1945: Une histoire transnationale*, Paris: Gallimard, 2017; Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (eds), *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World*, London: Routledge, 2017; Stacey Sloboda and Michael Yonan (eds), *Eighteenth Century Art Worlds: Global and Local Geographies of Art*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019. On migration, see Burcu Dogramaci and Birgit Mersmann (eds.), *Handbook of Art and Global Migration: Theories, Practices, and Challenges*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019; Anne R. Petersen, *Migration into Art: Transcultural Identities and Art-Making in a Globalised World*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017.
The list is far from exhaustive. For a critical survey of the field of mobile materiality, see Monica Juneja and Anna Grasskamp, 'EurAsian Matters: An Introduction', in Anna Grasskamp and Monica Juneja

identifiably some of the most prolifically deployed notions within recent writing by historians of different domains – art, ideas, societies, and economies. The terms are at once metaphors and methodological tools, a circumstance which has a bearing on their explanatory potential. From among these, mobility and connectivity have emerged as signature concepts informing investigations that claim the epithet global; their use is marked by varying degrees of rigour, ranging from casual descriptions of displacement from point A to B, to more in-depth investigations of processes that use mobility to uncover the constitutive nature of relationships that unfold in its wake. The precision and discernment with which connections and transfers have been analysed is, however, contingent on the efficacy of concepts deployed for this purpose: terms such as 'entanglement', 'braiding', 'flow', 'circulation', 'hybridity', '*métissage*', 'creolisation', to cite some of the most recurring examples, all invoke metaphors of natural, biological, or artisanal phenomena that condition their explanatory power. Metaphors of fluidity, be they riverine or physiological – for instance 'flows' or 'circulation' – are among the most widely used terms across disciplines, which end up eliding as much as they explain. The term 'flow', harnessed by globalisation anthropology of the 1990s to describe – rather than explain – macro-phenomena such as the movement of capital, or population, or commodities, ideas or events, invokes the natural law of gravity.[28] Its application to such domains where the laws of nature do not prevail, suppresses the role of human agency and the working of interests behind what is couched as a 'natural' process. Such interests, as Stuart Rockefeller reminds us, privilege the large-scale, 'a managerial perspective' over individuals and small-scale phenomena.[29] Using the term 'flow', or its companion 'circulation', places emphasis on movement per se, smooth, continuous and unimpeded, rather than processuality and transformation.[30] I will return to the issue of terms, which have become catchwords that elide rather than throw light on processes, in the following section that engages with the concept of transculturation. Another concept used to elaborate, quantify, and graphically represent global mobility is the 'network': it serves as a tool to encompass, once more, the transcontinental scale of empires, technologies, migration systems or art movements. Explaining the utility of the network, Bruno Latour invokes the poetic vision of 'Ariadne's thread' of interwoven stories 'that would allow us to pass with continuity from the local to the global, from the human to the nonhuman'.[31] While for Latour the network offered a corrective to the

(eds), *EurAsian Matters: China, Europe, and the Transcultural Object, 1600–1800*, Heidelberg: Springer, 2018, pp. 3–33.

28 The term 'flow' came into widespread usage following the writings of leading anthropologists. See Manuel Castells, *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring and the Urban-Regional Process*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989; Ulf Hannerz, 'Notes on the Global Ecumene', *Public Culture*, vol. 1 (2), 1989: 66–75; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

29 Stuart A. Rockefeller, 'Flow', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 52 (4), 2011: 557–78, here 565ff.

30 On circulation, in particular its evocation of the passage of liquids in human anatomy, see Stefanie Gänger, 'Circulation: Reflections on Circularity, Entity, and Liquidity in the Language of Global History', *Journal of Global History*, vol. 12 (3), 2017: 303–18; also Monika Dommann, 'Alles fließt: soll die Geschichte nomadischer werden?', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, vol. 42 (3), 2016: 516–34.

31 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 121.

modernist privileging of segregation and purity, its use, as for instance in art history, as a tool to destabilise myths of centres and peripheries together with the hierarchies they transport, begs more questions than it answers.[32] Providing a two-dimensional visualisation of a global spread, the nodal points and connecting lines of a network when, for example, used as a tool to study modernism, are not in a position to shed light on the third dimension that encompasses differences, unevenness and asymmetries of power, so constitutive of global modernist art movements. How do we measure varying intensities within the spread, the differential levels of entanglement? How do we identify the beneficiaries and losers within these relationships, the play of scales across the global to the regional, national, and local?[33]

Global histories – be they of art or culture, of economics or politics – mostly struggle methodologically with the problem of aspiring to be at once inclusive and 'synthetic'.[34] The historian Jürgen Osterhammel locates a deficit of global history within a 'lack of discursive autarchy and a shallow rootedness in mainstream historiography', which has made it of necessity dependent on 'conceptual inputs from outside its own purview'.[35] Several art historical forays in the field, having drawn on impulses from history, globalisation anthropology, mobility studies, postcolonial and, more recently, decolonial studies, tend to suffer from an overdose of eclecticism and empty buzzwords: the global is both 'transnational' and 'translocal', it could 'open up peripheries of all kinds', as well as highlight 'postcolonial problematics'.[36] Though initially concentrated within universities and cultural institutions of the North-Atlantic world, the 'global' as an epithet for art and art history has more recently acquired a footing in regions of the so-called Global South, more often than not driven by the feverish activity of exhibition and market circuits. Being global has rapidly become a

---

32 Joyeux-Prunel's use of the network to decentre canonical narratives of modernism is an object lesson in the limitations of this mode, which in the final analysis leaves existing Eurocentric hierarchies and explanatory devices in place. See Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, 'Provincializing Paris: The Center-Periphery Narrative of Modern Art in Light of Quantitative and Transnational Approaches', *Artl@s Bulletin*, vol. 4 (1), 2015: Article 4.
   Also by the same author, 'Provincializing New York: In and Out of the Geopolitics of Art After 1945', *Artl@s Bulletin*, vol. 10 (1), 2021: Article 12.
   A more insightful use of the method can be found in Avinoam Shalem, ' "What a Small World": Interpreting Works of Art in the Age of Global Art History', *Getty Research Journal*, vol. 13, 2021: 121–42.

33 A detailed engagement with these issues follows in Chapter Three.

34 The term has been used by Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel while introducing a special issue of the *Art@tlas Bulletin* titled 'Art History and the Global Challenge: A Range of Critical Perspectives'. She defines a 'truly global narrative' as one 'that would do justice to art from all countries' and at the same time produce 'convincing narratives with which to challenge the canon', Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, 'The Global History of Art and the Challenge of the Grand Narrative', *Art@tlas Bulletin*, vol. 6 (1), 2017: 3–5, here 4.

35 Osterhammel, 'Global History and Historical Sociology': 24. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, another historian, who had coined the term 'connected histories' long before the so-designated global turn gained in prominence, continues to distance himself from the latter's current articulations: much of global history, according to him, suffers from a lack of clarity about its contours; additionally from chronological myopia and an inability to distinguish between 'global' and the 'universal'. See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Global Intellectual History Beyond Hegel and Marx', *History and Theory*, vol. 54 (1): 126–37. On 'connected histories', Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 31 (3), 1997: 735–62.

36 Joyeux-Prunel, 'The Global History of Art': 3.

sign of being with the times. At the same time, the epithet resolutely connotes distance: it refers to the 'elsewhere', both cartographically as well as conceptually. Doing a global art history therefore becomes a gesture of inclusion, of accommodating the 'other', while the 'local' stands for where the author of that history is positioned. Viewed in this perspective, the call to 'challenge the canon'[37] turns out to be less an attempt to dismantle it than rather a plea to make it more inclusive. Inclusion or expansion are the catchwords of both contemporary art institutions as well as a popular brand of global/world art history. While the former strive to co-opt artists from across the world into a late-capitalist art system where even the most radical art positions can be commodified for the consumption of a public with an insatiable thirst for novelty, the latter is expansively charted to bring 'art from all countries' into its fold, though the underpinnings of its framing concepts remain unquestioned. Anchored within the undergraduate syllabi of universities in North America and parts of Western Europe, such world/global art histories locate themselves within a genealogy that goes back to the early formation of the discipline, when it undertook similar moves to produce authoritative knowledge about nations, cultures and the world.[38] Yet expansion or inclusion per se, this book argues, are methodological and pedagogical procedures that do not by their analytical intent undermine the frameworks they seek to transgress, or at best do so only tangentially.

The contestations surrounding the idea of the global coupled with its extensive ambitions, have given the term an amorphous, elusive quality that often begs more questions than it explains. When deployed as a perspective for art history, it has shown a proclivity to eclecticism that blunts its critical potential. Most practitioners of global art history have tended to conflate its subjects of investigation with the phenomenon of globalisation, rather than

---

37 Ibid: 4.

38 *Weltkunstgeschichte*, a genre of art historical writing that proliferated mainly in German-language texts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was described as 'a history of art of all times and people', as the title of a six-volume work by the art historian and director of the Dresden Art Gallery proclaimed. See Karl Woermann, *Geschichte der Kunst aller Zeiten und Völkern*, 6 vols., Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1900–1922. This historiographical perspective is being upheld today as an example of a cosmopolitan movement in art history, one that prefigured the present global turn. Tracing a genealogical link while eschewing a genealogical critique serves as a mode of legitimation for a current of global/world art history today. Both, I argue in a detailed unpacking of this historiographical trend in Chapter One below, end up in producing merely one more variant of a master narrative.

Among efforts to connect *Weltkunstgeschichte* to the present are Zijlmans and Van Damme (eds), *World Art Studies*; Wilfried Van Damme, '"Good to Think": The Historiography of World Art Studies', *World Art*, vol. 1 (1), 2011: 43–57; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, 'Reflections on World Art History', in: DaCosta Kaufmann et al. (eds), *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, pp. 23–46; Joyeux-Prunel, 'Art History and the Global'; Ingeborg Reichle, '*The Origin of Species* and the Rise of World Art History: Ernst Grosse's Encounter with the Beginnings of Art', in: Trede, Wakita and Guth (eds), *Japanese Art – Transcultural Perspectives;* see also my 'Comment' to the Section 'Methodologies, Texts, and Discourses' in the same volume.

An exception to this framing of world art history that integrates nations and localities in 'regional networks of interaction' is Claire J. Farago, 'Imagining Art History Otherwise', in: Jane C. Davidson and Sandra Esslinger (eds), *Global Art and World Art in the Practice of University and Museum*, London/ New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 115–30; Farago develops an alternative approach in her book in progress titled *Cultural Memory in the Era of Climate Crisis: Writing Borderless Histories of Art*, Routledge (forthcoming 2023). Further references can be found in Chapter One below.

attend to developing globality as a stringent, reflexive mode of interrogation. A more robust theoretical scaffolding is required in order to be able to shake up those epistemic foundations of the discipline that continue to shape our scholarly practice. The concept of transculture/transculturation – as the following section will elaborate – can form the keystone of a critical globality, which would enable art history to transcend parochialism of different shades – from that of Eurocentrism to the insularity of individual area studies.

Transculturation as Critical Globality

Thinking the global as a critical perspective rather than a spatial or temporal quality requires a separation of globality from the fact of globalisation. While the latter constitutes a set of economic, political, and technological phenomena, the former can be described as a conceptual matrix governed by a logic not informed by a neoliberal globalism that then morphs into right-wing nationalism. A critical globality that views art history neither as an all-encompassing, super-sized subject, nor as a narrative of contemporary globalisation, might instead begin by posing the question of culture in its conflictual genealogies and its concatenation with our disciplines and institutions. When applied to societies of the past and present, the discursive category of 'culture' has invariably existed in tension with the unruly and contradictory trends generated by mobility and extended contacts that have characterised regions and social collectives across the globe since the earliest historical epochs. The terms 'transculture'/'transculturation'/'transculturality' are an explicit critique of the notion, as it emerged in the humanities and social sciences in tandem with the idea of the modern nation. The nationally framed understanding of culture was premised on the postulate that lifeworlds of identifiable groups were ethnically bound, internally cohesive and linguistically homogenous spheres. Coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969), the concept of transculturation undermines the stable nexus between culture and the territorial container of the nation-state by drawing our attention to the processuality of cultural formations. To grasp the concept's relevance to the crises of the present as well as to the methodological challenge of rehabilitating the global, it would be helpful to pay attention to its genealogy.

The genealogy of transculturation goes back to the world-historical context of the mid-twentieth century. Politically, this was a time when fascism and militarism had engulfed much of Europe and drew the world into its destructive fold, while in the colonised peripheries anti-colonial movements – that saw the building of national cultures together with the fashioning of self-determining political structures – were already a source of ferment. More concretely, the year 1940 saw the publication of Ortiz's book, *Contrapunteo Cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, where the term was coined.[39] In his study of sugar and tobacco cultures

---

39   Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. by Harriet Onís, New York: Knopf, 1947; reprinted with an Introduction by Fernando Coronil, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995. All references here are to the edition of 1995.

in postcolonial Cuba, Ortiz saw transculturation as a process with an explanatory potential that went beyond the existing term 'acculturation', in that it helped reconceptualise processes of adaptation as transformation, as long-term processes that unfolded through extended contacts and relationships between cultures.[40] The context in which this investigation was undertaken – one marked by the changing geo-politics of empires, the emergence and subsequent fall of fascist regimes in Europe that coincided with the defeat of progressive forces in Cuba, together with the emergence of assertive voices in locations affected by colonialism – endowed the notion of transculturation from the start with a critical potential.

Oritz's historical analysis of the creation of national identity in Cuba unfolds as a critique of the cultural representations of colonialism and its strategies of rule, as a dismantling of the superior claims of Western modernity while at the same time consciously eschewing an idea of the nation as a site of 'authenticity' or a haven of purity. The anti-imperialist stance of the work has been developed within the framework of an emerging nation, a factor that accounts for the particularities of the book's structure and its literary qualities that to a reader today might come across as an idiosyncratic use of allegory in a work of history. Yet, the author remained very much in tune with his times when consciously deploying the literary modes that characterised writings on the nation in the mid-twentieth century.[41] A tension familiar to us today runs through the work that, on the one hand, sets out to recover the voices and agency of those who remain unheard; and on the other, to uncover dynamic processes of transculturation that followed from migration, multilingualism and ethnic plurality and were constitutive of the identities of those inhabiting the 'imagined community'.[42] Ortiz confronts these processes with such attempts to stabilize their unruliness that sought recourse to representations of an integrated cultural unit, cast as the bounded space of the nation and the ideological basis for all fixed identities. The invention of a past considered uncontaminated by cultural contact is analysed by him in terms that point to the workings of power within groups that cut across the coloniser-colonised divide, a perspective that avoids the trap of thinking in binaries that has characterised nationalist positions as well as much of postcolonial and, more recently, decolonial analysis.[43] By treating cultural forms as fluid

---

40 Ibid, pp. 97–98.
41 Fernando Coronil, 'Introduction', in: Ibid: xx. A more extensive study of the nexus between literary forms and nascent political formations is Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.
42 Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991.
43 A theory of transculturation owes a formative impulse to postcolonial critique that, at the time it was formulated, sensitised us to border crossings and cultural mixing. In addition postcolonial analyses challenged the claims to universalism built into historiographical narratives, especially of modernity, situated in Europe. Yet its matrix – in spite of the powerful expositions of theoreticians such as Édouard Glissant, Gilberto Freire, Frantz Fanon or Paul Gilroy, to mention a handful – remains the coloniser-colony binary. A transcultural perspective allows us to locate these processes in a context that transcends this binary and views cultural phenomena as multi-sited interactions among units and places that are already a product of transculturation. I have discussed these questions at some length in a conversation with Christian Kravagna, see Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna, 'Understanding Transculturalism',

and unstable, Ortiz's study directs our attention in two directions: the work is imbued with a political rationale to challenge national frameworks, while at the same time apprehending at once the destructive and constructive moments in histories shaped by colonialism and imperialism. Through its critical valorisation of popular creativity, the study of sugar and tobacco shows how the social spaces of those who lived under coercive conditions were made habitable by them. The underlying ambivalence of conditions of oppression as well as the double-edged quality of movements of emancipation are insights that have been generally overlooked by those who have studied transculturation in modern contexts.[44]

In his preface to the 1995 edition of Ortiz's book, Fernando Coronil draws our attention to conditions in which the book circulated and that determined its reception – a world divided into capitalist and socialist blocs; to these a third group of 'developing' nations was appended, who negotiated either of the two paths to arrive at modernity.[45] Ortiz's book, Coronil writes, 'did not quite fit the terms of this polarized debate. It was unconventional in form and content … and it proposed neither unambiguous solutions nor a blueprint for the

---

in: Model House Research Group (ed.), *Transcultural Modernisms*, Berlin/Vienna: Sternberg Press, 2013, pp. 22–33.

More recently, theories of decoloniality have staked a claim to a 'radical rethinking' of postcolonial positions, which, in the words of one of its advocates, continue to work with 'essentially Western instruments and assumptions' to 'inadvertently reproduce coloniality of knowledge'. See, for example, Madina Tlostanova, 'The Postcolonial Condition, the Decolonial Option, and the Post-socialist Intervention', in Monika Albrecht (ed.), *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Neocolonial Present*, London: Routledge, 2020, pp. 165–78, here pp. 166–68. While an extensive critical engagement with decolonial perspectives is beyond the scope of this study, it needs to be pointed out that the notion of decolonisation and its various cognates are used in a wide range of contexts and in an eclectic manner, both as noun and verb: they could refer to a process of liberation from the colonial yoke, or designate an epochal condition and an epistemological frame, or serve as a call to action, to dismantle existing power constellations in domains such as museums, pedagogies, curricula, memory cultures … the list goes on. As a result, decolonial approaches mean different things, even as they all partake of a common polemical thrust. While the founding texts of decolonial theory critique what they conceive of as an all-encompassing totalitarian idea of modernity, the project of liberation that seeks to delink coloniality from modernity replicates the same totalising, binary structure between the so-called West – that is, Europe and the North Atlantic – and those it has excluded, by reducing a world of heterogeneous, unstable, transversal, and dynamic processes to a single, encompassing logic of coloniality. The totalising opposition between 'Western' epistemologies and 'Indigenous' languages ascribes a homogeneity or purity to each side, assuming that non-European epistemologies are innately egalitarian by virtue of being not from the West and by overlooking the hierarchies and modes of discrimination that structure the latter as well. A critical transcultural analysis over a long durée would instead sensitise us to the ways in which each of these allegedly hermetic categories was constituted through interactive relationships within the framework of colonialism as well as through pre- and early modern histories of connection.

See Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (eds), *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics Praxis*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018; Annibal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Knowledge and Latin America', *Nepantla: Views from the South*, vol. 1, 2000: 533–80.

44 An exception that effectively combines postcolonial critique with a transcultural perspective is Christian Kravagna, *Transmoderne: Eine Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts*, Berlin: b_books, 2017. It has been recently published in English: *Transmodern: An Art History of Contact, 1920–60*, transl. Jennifer Taylor, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022.

45 Coronil, 'Introduction', pp. xi–xii.

future.'[46] The world today presents us with new conditions for an engagement with the core concepts developed by Ortiz: the dissolution of older polarities cemented during the Cold War, coupled with fresh tensions within national formations following globalisation, intensified migration and a backlash of xenophobic nationalism and transnational fundamentalisms. Ceaselessly debated questions surrounding citizenship, belonging, the fabrication of cultural pasts and visions of the future, all impart an urgency to the making of art and to writing about it, both forming a domain of symbolic action. A transcultural understanding of cultural belonging that from its outset functioned as a lens and an analytical frame has, as it enters the space of present, the potential of being adjusted, expanded and fine-tuned. In the recent years, the transcultural has become a buzzword of sorts, adopted by a range of scholars in different, at times loose and not always consistent ways, and framed by different disciplinary contexts. Not all of them respond to or even acknowledge the ground-breaking relevance of the reflections proffered by Ortiz.[47]

46 Ibid. Coronil further explains the marginal presence of Oritz's work in mainstream anthropological writings of the twentieth century as a consequence of an asymmetry between scholars and theoretical perspectives emanating from the periphery and those that form the mainstream. Even the work of Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, that deals with very similar and related questions, does not consider Ortiz. Ten years later, Mary Louise Pratt drew on Ortiz to develop the notion of transculturation in relation to travel literature. See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge: London, 1992.

47 Among the more recent theorisations of the idea of transculturation/transculturality is the work of the philosopher Wolfgang Welsch, 'Transkulturalität: Zur veränderten Verfassung heutiger Kulturen', in: Irmela Schneider and Christian W. Thomsen (eds), *Hybridkultur: Medien, Netze, Künste*, Cologne: Wienand, 1997, pp. 67–90. For a critical take on Welsch, see Juneja and Kravagna, 'Understanding Transculturalism', pp. 24–25.

Transculturation as a theoretical tool borrowed from Ortiz has been productively used by Finbarr Barry Flood in his valuable study of the interactive relationships between north Indian political elites and Islamic polities during the early medieval period. The concept enables him to destabilise essentialist constructions of identities ascribed to Hindus and Muslims in the wake of present-day politics, and serves instead as a paradigm to grasp dynamic patterns of mutual engagement, which worked to generate mutable and contingent identities. The book's somewhat excessive dependence on analytical concepts and tools drawn from a wide range of theoretical currents – from French post-structuralist philosophy and sociological theory, to globalisation anthropology, postcolonial theory, radical materialism and post-humanism – does not allow it to systematically investigate or develop the full potential of a theory of transculturation for the discipline of art history; that indeed is not the objective of this otherwise path-breaking work. The notion of transculturation provides the author a perspective and useful corrective to the projection of modern notions of ethno-religious identities within a 'clash of civilisations' model onto the past. The flip side however is an over-emphasis on the question of identity and its practices, which runs through the book and brings back the very problem the study seeks to eschew. See Finbarr Barry Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and the Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

The term 'transcultural' has also been frequently invoked, though without reference to its sources or an attempt to flesh out its theoretical stakes, in contemporary art critical writing to propose a normative mode of cross-cultural pollination and artistic collaboration transcending national frames. See Nancy Adajania and Ranjit Hoskote, 'Notes Towards a Lexicon of Urgencies', in *Journal of Independent Curators International Research*, 1 October 2010, https://curatorsintl.org/research/notes-towards-a-lexicon-of-urgencies, accessed Dec. 2021.

Building on the insights extracted from Ortiz's allegory of Cuba, a potential theory of transculturation might be characterized as follows: the concept of transculturation provides both an episteme and a tool-box. By referring to a process of transformation that unfolds through extended contacts and relationships between cultures, it works to emancipate culture from the qualities of boundedness and essentialism ascribed to it when harnessed to a national framework. While transculturation presupposes for a large part spatial mobility, it is neither synonymous with nor reducible to it. Rather its focus on processes through which forms emerge within circuits of exchange make it a field constituted relationally. The new ontology of culture forms the kernel of a theoretical perspective that is distinct for its process-oriented dynamism and its concreteness. Its dynamic quality comes from opposing the presumption of static entities with pre-theorised transactions. In other words, the ostensible 'cultural' that a theory of transculturation takes as its object is not only fundamentally made through processes of transculturation in the first place, but continuously remade through all subsequent phases of its existence. Processual and continually morphing, such an ontology of culture is also concrete in that it is made from the ground up, precisely through its interaction between units that are constituted through these very processes. It partakes of what Achille Mbembe, in the epigraph to this chapter, terms a 'grounded theory' that is premised on reflexivity and is sensitive to the contingent. A theory of transculturation is concrete, also because it importantly attends to the numerous potential kinds of interaction that travel in the name of transculturation, and to the ways they shift in relation to particular contextual configurations in different historical and cultural settings. As I will discuss below, such a theory endeavours to bring forth a precise terminological apparatus to describe the kinds of interaction that constitute its core, rather than subsuming them all under blanket concepts, for instance hybridity or circulation.

A theory of transculturation can productively build on the groundwork of analytical approaches of the past decades – the linguistic-cum-cultural turn, postcolonial and gender studies – whose insights it has the potential to refine and take into more nuanced directions. As a critical perspective for art history, its reconceptualization of culture shows the way to rethinking the terms of the global away from its condition as a naturalised given or as an ensemble of institutional demands, towards a set of relations between units in a continual state of transformation. A transculturally framed history of art goes beyond the principle of additive extension and looks instead at the transformative processes that constitute art practice through cultural encounters and long-term relationships, whose traces can be followed back to the beginnings of history. Studying these multi-scalar relationalities across regional and local nodes urges us, in turn, to engage with various modes of defining globality, depending on place, time, and context. Casting art history in a critically global/transcultural frame involves questioning the taxonomies and values that have been built into the discipline since its inception, complicit with the formation of nations and empires, and have been taken as universal. These include the anchoring of style within single regions, the taxonomies of genres that are also hierarchies of value, and not least necessitate bringing back excluded materials, texts and questions centre-stage. Systems of value innate to art history

classify its objects as fine or decorative art, ethnological object, craft, curiosities, or articles of mass consumption. Following these taxonomies, the objects of art historical investigation are relegated to different sites of display and storage, according to the often not very consistent logic of genres and regional labels. Is Delft chinaware art or an object of everyday use? Does a Fatimid rock crystal, mounted and transformed into a Venetian reliquary, qualify as Islamic or Christian art? Why is a painting by Cézanne a more privileged subject of analysis, considered to possess a greater iconological and semantic complexity, than an ivory box? Today, institutions that house and display these objects are confronted with the challenge of how to translate the transcultural lives of things into a curatorial and pedagogical practice that can effectively make a polyphonous object narrate its many stories, or how to find ways of naming and locating that avoid freezing its identity within a myth of origins. An important plank of an emergent transculturally reflexive art history is to use connected material cultures to unsettle many narratives of civilisational uniqueness, in scholarship as well as in the expanding world of curation and display. The instability introduced by the transcultural object within the ordered world of museum labels that once sought to allow a visitor, for instance, to read a 'culture' off a thing in a glass case, has already begun to suggest pathways for scholarship and curating, with a view to tackling the question of how matter shapes aesthetics and culture.[48]

Separating individual objects by organising them according to genres and plotting their lives in neat chronological sequences has brought forth the category of style to serve as a convenient tool for stabilising the endless mobility and metamorphoses of objects and forms. Shaped primarily, though not exclusively, by the development of artistic form, style functions as a key anchor of art history. It constitutes a vital premise of the temporal notion of an art historical 'period' or 'school' marked by similarities of form, thematic preoccupation, or technical approaches to formal construction or composition.[49] Critical globality as viewed through a transcultural lens questions the idea of stylistic development that is artificially maintained by attending to a single geographical location considered self-contained. More importantly, by undermining longstanding interpretations of cultural identity that served as an epistemic premise of the discipline of art history, a transcultural perspective allows you to rethink the notion of stylistic development that replicates a biological evolutionary model and thereby suppresses human agency as well as the transformative effects of the circulation of objects and practices. A global art history, conceived as transcultural process, intensifies the discipline's focus on objects and practices by reading them not as discrete phenomena, but themselves as a bundle of multiple interlinked processes that unfold at varying speeds

---

48   These and related issues have been discussed in Juneja and Grasskamp, 'EurAsian Matters – An Introduction'.

49   Jaś Elsner has traced the genealogy of style to the sixteenth century and ascribes its refinement and extraordinary subtlety to Heinrich Wölfflin's *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1915). Elsner refers to style as a 'crucial reminder of our discipline's depths', as its 'lineage', without however drawing attention to the elisions built into that lineage. Jaś Elsner, 'Style', in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (eds), *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 98–109, quote p. 108.

and intensities. It demands that the art historian tease out and describe the strands of this mutable assemblage. This approach can preclude the art historical impasse between a formalism that engages objects in a closed semantic circle of the present and a contextualism that privileges the singular moment, location and human agent of a work's production, all circumscribed within a fixed spatial and temporal unit.

Transculturation has inherited a prolific vocabulary brought forth by scholarship of the recent decades, which highlights 'porous boundaries', 'mobility', 'fuzziness', 'flows', 'entanglement', 'hybridity', '*métissage*', 'creolisation', 'in-between-ness', and the like, all intended as critical tools to prise open units of investigation structured around stable entities. The much-used notion of hybridity, for example, once viewed with reservations owing to its biologistic overtones and associations with racial obsessions surrounding purity and miscegenation, was re-signified in postcolonial writings as a critical tool to undermine a conception of closed cultures.[50] Yet, today, these terms too have undergone a dilution of their one-time explanatory power owing partly to inflationary usage, but also to the fact that they end up as theoretical straightjackets into which a host of diverse experiences come to be accommodated. Their explanatory potential stops short of coming to grips with greater precision about the different kinds of relational possibilities built into processes of transculturation, involving agents, practices and temporalities in historically specific settings. As a perspective for the humanities in general, and art history in particular, a theory of transculturation seeks to develop a more differentiated vocabulary to capture the morphology of the processes through which difference is negotiated within encounters: through selective appropriation, mediation, translation, reconfiguration, re-historicising, and rereading of signs, alternatively through non-communication, friction, disconnection, rejection, or resistance – or through a succession or coexistence of any of these. Exploring the possible range of transactions built into these dynamics works as a safeguard against polar conceptions of identity and alterity, equally against dichotomies between complete absorption and resistance that have characterised recent studies, even as they admirably seek to write a connected art history across Europe and Asia.[51] Paying greater attention to multiple relationalities that unfold in any context, including overtly asymmetrical constellations as in the coloniser–colony divide, involves finding ways of remapping experiences and experiments of the art world. This in turn means attending to scale and to multiple sites of knowledge and to shifting perspectives within a generative agonism between power and resistance. The latter, for example, came to be an important driving force for modernist art within a colonial context.[52] Not least, the genealogical trajectory of transculturation has shown it to be an effective tool to deal

---

50 However, by privileging 'mixing', the notion of hybridity presupposes, if not produces, 'pure' original cultures. A critical take on the uses of hybridity as an analytical tool is Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn, 'Hybridity and its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America', *Colonial Latin American Review*, vol. 12 (1), 2003: 5–35.

51 One such example is Hans Belting, *Florenz und Bagdad: Eine weatöstliche Geschichte des Blicks*, Munich: C. H. Beck, 2008.

52 Extensively discussed in Chapter Three below.

with issues such as racism as well as more recent forms of ethnocentrism that have permeated art worlds through the modern and contemporary periods.[53] The agenda of writing a transcultural history of art in the twenty-first century has grown in complexity as it faces constellations of the present: this has brought forth its set of routine orthodoxies in thinking about cultural difference, following the logic of economic globalisation and multicultural inclusiveness. Today, we experience multiculturalism as a progressive political imperative in liberal democracies, one that is characterised by an affirmation of cultural diversity as value per se. It celebrates cultural difference as a form of plenitude in which diversity exists side by side, with little interaction or dynamism among the diverse elements. Multicultural inclusion frequently results in an extended horizontal breadth that tends to de-historicise and flatten out contradictory relationships amongst those brought together in the name of tolerance and inclusiveness. The discussions in this book problematise the question of multiculturalism and its implications for art production and curation, and propose that we distinguish the multicultural from the transcultural.

A transculturally framed art history underlines the importance of studying concepts as migrant notions. It questions the assumptions, based on observations from the contemporary art world, that a global circulation of key terms – art, image, vision, to name a few – used ubiquitously also stand for a shared universe of meaning across the globe. It also takes a more nuanced view of the phenomenon of epistemic violence, held to be inflicted by imposing 'Western' analytical frames on 'non-Western' cultures. Instead, it argues that when concepts migrate – as for example they did from the Western world to Asian contexts – they disconnect from their original moorings while taking roots in new cultural settings. This is a process of transculturation where conceptual categories – like the notion of art itself – absorb other subterranean concepts, or become entangled with different practices and understandings, sometimes also producing conflicting positions within a single region. Recognising this, in turn, calls for taking apart meta-geographic designations such as Western or non-Western that become meaningless, as they ascribe stable attributes to concepts.[54] A transcultural study of artistic concepts requires, first, taking a close look at the negotiation between different linguistic sources and, secondly, it needs to extend the formation of the concept beyond purely lexical definitions to investigate the interaction between text and visual practice that is crucial to meaning-making and the production of a society's conceptual knowledge. In my previous research as well as in the case studies investigated in this book, I have drawn on this method to study a lexicon of art historical terms – including art, artisan, image, ornament, landscape, portrait, copy, to name a few – by accommodating a plurality of textual sources

---

53 This dimension has been examined at length by Christian Kravagna is his investigation of the Harlem Renaissance and African American modernism, see Kravagna, *Transmoderne: Eine Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts;* also Cornelia Kogoj and Christian Kravagna, *Das amerikanische Museum: Sklaverei, schwarze Geschichte und der Kampf um Gerechtigkeit in Museen der Südstaaten*, Berlin: Mandelbaum Verlag, 2017.

54 On metageography as a classificatory mode, see Martin E. Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

and pictorial media while charting the migrant trajectories of some of the key concepts of art history.[55]

Arguing against an established dictum by which 'Western' particularity is transformed into a model of universality, Ortiz's study of Cuba calls attention to the play of globally interconnected particularities. If the self-fashioning of sovereign centres, his book demonstrates, entails the making of dependent peripheries, it at the same time tells the story of actors on the margins who turn these into centres and fashion fluid identities through dynamic processes of interaction. Binary oppositions – West/non-West, centre/peripheries, dominant/dominated, white/dark – are treated not as fixed, but as mutable and productive owing to their transcultural formation. Thinking within this frame and carrying the analysis further allows us to recast a widely prevalent conception of polar oppositions in dynamic terms: notions of centres and peripheries, or mainstream and margins, global and local, are understood as constituted through imagined geographies, as part of world-making practices that unfold in specific regional or national or international contexts. We are thus required to view these categories as mutable and relational, and to pay attention to how they come into being and the adjustments they undergo in changing contexts on different scales. Art histories that take as their starting point projects emanating from global 'off-centres'[56] potentially work towards loosening the rigid linearity of canonical narratives; in addition a transcultural understanding of transregionally connected particularities can realign our perceptions of centres and peripheries through the study of comparisons, interactions and resonances. The recognition that even as actors and institutions in different localities are anchored within specific pedagogies and practices of art and continue to grapple with legacies that belong to particular pasts – such as colonisation – no locality, however specific its dynamics, is sealed off from others, is crucial to a revitalised global art historical approach.

By situating the struggle against Eurocentrism within the political and cultural confines of the nation and of reformist national thought, *Cuban Counterpoint* anticipates the predicament of many anti-colonial national movements across the globe. In other words, the nation offered the ground on which a politics of emancipation could be staged, while at the same time it partook of the production of notions such as separate, pure cultures, the authentic native, bounded identities, all to serve as artifices of power. Viewed in this light, the explanatory potential of the transcultural as an analytical tool exceeds that of the 'transnational', frequently used in global studies to transcend the boundaries of individual nation-states,

---

55 See for instance, Monica Juneja, 'Tracking the Routes of Vision in Early Modern Eurasia', in: Karin Gludovatz, Juliane Noth and Joachim Rees (eds), *The Itineraries of Art: Topographies of Artistic Mobility in Europe and Asia*, Paderborn: Fink Verlag, 2015, pp. 57–85; Monica Juneja, 'Likeness as a Migrating Concept – Artfully Portraying the Universal Ruler in Early Modern South Asia', *Histoire de l'Art*, vol. 82 (1), 2018: 55–70; Monica Juneja, 'From the Religious to the Aesthetic Image – or the Struggle over Art that Offends', in: Christiane Kruse, Birgit Meyer and Anne-Marie Korte (eds), *Taking Offense. Religion, Art and Visual Culture in Plural Confgurations*, Munich: Fink Verlag, 2018, pp. 161–189.

56 The term has been coined by Okwui Enwezor, to designate a location 'structured by the simultaneous existence of multiple centers', see Okwui Enwezor, 'Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 109 (3), 2010: 595–620, here 601–2.

without however disrupting the nexus between the entities 'nation' and 'culture' through unpacking the former and delineating its internal faultlines. These are engendered when nations manufacture their version of the past through privileging certain strands of culture as authentically national, while others are relegated to categories that are also hierarchies, such as folk traditions or minority cultures. A transcultural position also sets itself apart from recent decolonial approaches whose analytical frame incarcerates nation and colonising power as uncompromising, undifferentiated oppositional forces.[57] Neither is the national, as I argue, entirely incommensurable with the global – this being an underlying premise of much of global history. The relationship between the two explored in this book is more complex and contradictory in view of the nation's role in resisting the violence of conquest and coloni-sation on the one hand, conjoined, on the other, to its need to stabilise its self-representation through a play of power, dispossession and everyday violence. The latter, in turn, is sustained by ideologies and technologies of power, imbricated in global/transcultural attachments. In the domain of art history, a transcultural perspective refuses the choice of the nation as a unit of investigation and characterising principle of the enterprise of art-making, even while acknowledging its potential as an imagined realm for artistic positions, a life-giving force in the face of colonialism and neo-colonialism. When adopted as an automatic gesture to frame surveys and units of art historical investigations, the analytical category of the nation

57 Mignolo and Walsh (eds), *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics Praxis*; Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Mo-dernity: Decolonial Aesthesis and the End of the Contemporary*, Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, 2020. The latter's reductive conflation of modernity and coloniality, a founding premise of decolonial theo-ry, overlooks the long history of the former's migrations, mutations, reenactments on sites across the globe, where subjects, not least the colonised, have redefined and reenacted what it means to be modern. Since theorisations of decoloniality are primarily anchored in the experience of settler colonialism on the American continent, a context where the colonising power continues to occupy the territory of the colonised, such theoretical expositions tend to essentialise colonialism as a historical phenomenon. No doubt all colonialisms are exploitative by nature, marked by civilising missions and varying degrees of brutality; at the same time, processes of producing knowledge and art in different colonial contexts across the world play out in ways more complex and less reductive than those posited by the advocates of decolonial theory. A more nuanced view, though one equally based on the example of settler colonialism is Charlene V. Black and Tim Barringer, 'Decolonizing Art and Empire', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 104 (1), 2022: 6–20. See Chapter Three below for a different understanding of modernity and modernism.
Another term that has appeared in recent scholarship – often conjoined to a decolonial approach – is the 'transversal'. It has been used, for example, by Ming Tiampo, more as a metaphor: 'connecting lines that in Euclidean geometry create equal angles at their point of intersection'. Tiampo then invokes transver-sality as a tool to study the connections of artists who came from different regions of the world to the Slade School of Art in London and are said to have built 'shared conceptual structures', without however unravelling the explanatory potential of the term itself. Moreover the author's use of the term 'decolonial' to characterize the modernism of artists from erstwhile colonies implicitly replicates the distinction once made between an unmarked (Euro-American) modernism, regarded as mainstream, and peripheral, alternative variants emanating from elsewhere. See Ming Tiampo, 'Transversal Articulations: Decolo-nial Modernism and the Slade School of Fine Art', in Okwui Enwezor and Atreyee Gupta (eds), *Postwar – A Global Art History, 1945–1965*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (forthcoming). I am grateful to the author for sharing her unpublished draft with me. Marsha Meskimmon on the other hand develops the notion of transversality to analyse the workings of multiple, dialogical coalitions forged across social divisions and hierarchies and allied to radical practice. See Marsha Meskimmon, *Transnational Femi-nisms, Transversal Politics and Art: Entanglements and Intersections*, London: Routledge, 2020.

is bound to lapse into the ethnographic reflexes that underpin such a choice. And yet, as the themes discussed in this book will show, the category of the nation can equally function as a point of critical interrogation, built around questions rather than answers. It can as well serve as an opportunity to redraw the matrix of references within which concepts of culture might be recast.

A Potential Art History

Following Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, I conceive of a 'potential' art history as a way of bringing unasked questions about the past, suppressed or elided possibilities to the forefront of art historical narratives.[58] The potentiality of a reflexive, transculturally oriented globality works in two directions. It enables recovering those constitutive forms of encounter and relationships that unfolded at any historical juncture without being shaped exclusively or exhausted by projections of national thinking. In addition, it makes for a change of register to allow theory-building from beyond the unmarked Euro-American centre of dominant narratives. Exploring modalities of theorising experiences from a 'periphery', now opened up for a transcultural enquiry, is a step towards breaking the inertia of long-standing conceptual and institutional divisions by which 'regions' whose trajectories were positioned outside of an assumed 'mainstream' were then relegated to segregated pockets termed area studies. This means investigating the dynamics of art-making and theorising from these regions to ask how the insights they bring forth could in turn unsettle what has become a default mode of art historical practice. Reconfiguring key conceptual categories from the perspective of the so-called periphery without excluding its historical connections to multiple sites, both in as well as outside of Euro-America, can help create a more plausible theoretical scaffolding for the discipline to then respond to the challenge of cultural plurality. These broad concerns have translated into the more specific research located in South Asia that this book brings together in a move to supplement macro-perspectives by descending into the thicket of individual sites, thereby negotiating multiple scales beyond the global – nation, region, locality – and conjoining these to individual subject positions. It aims to unravel the dynamics of those interactive processes that make for a globally connected art history, one which breaks out of both national frameworks as well as well-worn paradigms of 'centres and peripheries' or 'the West and the rest'.

The term 'periphery' that features in the book's title, paradoxical as it may sound at first, connotes both a situation and a scholarly position. Though identified with marginality and obscurity, a so-designated periphery has the capacity to challenge foundational ideas of exclusivity and universality, and to offer alternative positions to sedimented intellectual claims. In other words, mining the peripheries to rebound on the centre, can effectively dismantle the Manichean dualism of centre and periphery. Such a proposition cannot, however,

---

58 Ariella A. Azoulay, 'Potential History: Thinking Through Violence', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 39 (3), 2013: 548–74.

be carried out by simply reversing an established hierarchy, while leaving its teleology intact. Writing from the periphery, in the approach followed in this book, is premised on viewing both centres and peripheries through a transcultural lens, to argue that each site is a hotbed of transculturation and cannot be studied in exclusive pockets. For example, artistic production classified as Buddhist, whose origins lay in present-day India, grew into a full-blown visual and sculptural language in the wake of transcultural processes that covered the expanse of the Indian subcontinent and beyond, to encompass Afghanistan, Bactria, Greece, Central and East Asia. Similarly, the trajectories of modernist art in the twentieth century were constituted through the experimental energies of sites across the globe – from Paris, Berlin, Ljubljana, Cairo, Zaria, São Paolo, Bombay, Mexico City, Tokyo … the list goes on. Scholarship produced in regions, which since the twentieth century have been parcelled into national units or isolated area studies, does not feature in the contemporary canon of the global. Not only has it not found a place in a global repository of intellectual resources and narratives, its potential to exert analytical pressure on that repository, to recalibrate, even unsettle the certitudes of that canon, has yet to be fully realised. We might usefully imagine the periphery less as a place, instead conceive of it as a critical modality rather than a pristine locality.

The investigations in this book take as their starting point a region long regarded a periphery of Euro-America, to then open it to a transcultural analysis that would overcome the limitations of both a national framework as well as the provincialism of a single, sealed 'area'. They address the challenge of finding explanatory paradigms for dealing with processes which, following mobility and encounter, are formed through a tension between cultural difference and historical connectivity. Such processes might appear paradoxical in that they combine accommodation, partial absorption, refusal or engagement at different levels with cultural difference, without necessarily producing synchronicity. The agenda to look for cultural commensurability across distances has frequently led to exclusion or repression of aspects of distinctiveness or the non-commensurable. What are the analytical tools that would help us come to grips with the tension between the commensurable and the incommensurable? And what constitutes the 'commensurable'? Is that a category that depends on the intellectual and philosophical positions of modern scholarship? As we negotiate the tension or the shifting relationships between the culturally commensurable and the non-assimilable, we would then be able to recuperate practices fundamental to art historical investigation – such as vision, materiality, and canonical values – which have undergone erasure or flattening due to the diffusion of modern disciplinary taxonomies across the globe. Does the investigation of art history from a perspective outside of the West, though shaped through interaction with travelling Western concepts, challenge us to rethink some of the discipline's premises in a way as to grow beyond both claims of universality as well as radical cultural relativism, and instead privilege an approach that historicises difference and locates it in a field of forces?

Each of the chapters of this book is informed by the concern to link the 'region' to the 'mainstream' discipline so as to reflect on the latter's underlying assumptions and point the

way to a non-hierarchical, critical, and capacious art history that can serve as a potential tool for unravelling connections, differences and frictions among regions across the globe. The notion of a meditation informing each case study draws its inspiration from two sources, distinct and yet perhaps linked by an invisible thread of affinity.[59] Meditation here might be understood as an assemblage of micro-stories, questions, arguments and tools of trans-cultural research which incessantly interrogates established frames. Through a process of methodological doubt, it seeks to rebuild knowledge from the ground up, to arrive at a mode of self-knowledge. The themes handled in the book are inevitably selective, often addressed to art history syllabi, both current as well as those aspiring to a global orientation. At the same time, it has been a conscious decision to move away from some of the prominent sub-jects – such as biennials and nomadic curators, exhibition circuits, the art market – with which a global art history continues to be largely identified, and which are fast acquiring the status of a new canon. These do not feature centrally, or do so at best tangentially, within the themes discussed in the following chapters. More importantly, my approach eschews a pre-sentist view of global entanglements to investigate processes of transculturation long before the advent of finance capital and the digital revolution, to engage with the specific dynam-ics and tensions of pre- and early modern forms of encounter, circulation, and reception. While recognising the revolutionary import of digitality for the production and circulation of knowledge, the subject has not been tackled frontally in my discussion of the contempo-rary art world, owing to the continuing unevenness in the intensity and scale of digitisation across the world, which has created its own forms of 'locational hierarchies' that shape the production of both art and the writing of its histories.[60] The aim of the book is not to bring forth one more meta-narrative, but to focus on a selection of themes from one particular region that together signal to a possible path towards revitalising the global with a criticality whose shape is contingent at once on its situatedness as on its transcultural dynamics.

The book begins by investigating the genealogies of world-making within the practice of art history to query its legacies for the present global turn within the discipline. The first chapter, 'The World in a Grain of Sand: A Genealogy of World Art Studies', looks at a forma-tive conjuncture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when scholarship on art assumed a world-configuring function while seeking to produce authoritative knowl-edge about nations, cultures and the world. Investigating this trajectory of the discipline is important, not least because it has been recently hailed as prefiguring present attempts to make the discipline global.[61] The chapter focuses primarily, though not exclusively, on German language texts that came under the label of *Weltkunstgeschichte* and analyses the

---

59 I am indebted, first to Donald Preziosi, whose book (see note 10) carries the subtitle: *Meditations on a Coy Science*. The artist Atul Dodiya's memorable installation of 2011, *Meditation (with Open Eyes)* that features on the cover of this book provides another source: the work translates through an assemblage of photographs, objects and ephemera some of the transcultural thinking that runs through the pages of this book.

60 Gupta, 'Art History and the Global Challenge': 22.

61 See note 38.

premises and argumentative structures that characterised the efforts of art history to revitalise itself by bringing the world into its purview. I ask why the cosmopolitan potential ascribed to this current of art historiography remained unrealised during a moment of intense global exchange and challenges, not dissimilar to those of the present. What are the methodological implications of these initiatives for similar positions today? This genealogy of world-making in art history directs our attention to those epistemic foundations that continue to shape our scholarly practice, both in the North-Atlantic West as well as in those regions of the world where the modern discipline has journeyed and acquired roots, even as it responds to local contingencies. The exercise in unpacking the foundations of an art history that strove to be inclusive is an urgent one in contemporary times as the discipline endeavours once more to become 'global'.

Chapter two, 'Making and Seeing Images: Tracking the Routes of Vision in Early Modern Eurasia', takes as its starting point theoretical stances in the field of world art studies that have tended to alternate between two poles: between the view which considers seeing/vision as constituting a human universal, a common anthropological denominator that holds humans together across time and space[62] and the extreme relativist position which advocates the use of each cultural tradition's core concepts of visuality and the image, whose incommensurability and fixity are assumed.[63] As distinct from these positions, I propose that vision itself needs to be a subject of historical investigation. The case study discussed in this chapter focuses on image-making and circulation in early modern court cultures in South Asia framed in a Eurasian context. It examines the ways in which translating the 'seen' onto a two-dimensional surface of the image was a process shaped by the dynamic between cultural mobility across sites in Europe and Asia and new forms of self-reflection induced by itinerant images and objects, producing thereby different grades of commensurability and incommensurability. An important dimension in the transculturation of image worlds was the self-conscious use of art historical referencing in the practice of image-making – citation, repetition, copying, pastiche – as modes of cultural communication and articulations of worldly awareness. Intrinsic to a transregional and transhistorical circulation of objects and attitudes towards the image, the chapter argues, are cosmologies and questions of hermeneutics that account for the degree of their assimilability through translation as well as its refusal. This study, in addition, allows us to disaggregate a singular conception of vision into historically variable ways of seeing in which the materiality of image making equally informs vision to make it a synaesthetic experience.

Chapter three, 'Traversing Scale(s): Transcultural Modernism with and beyond the Nation', engages with the conceptual category of modernism, long viewed as a quintessential European phenomenon which then was said to have 'spread' to the rest of the world. My account participates in the critical scrutiny that such a position has undergone in the recent

---

62 Onians, *Atlas of World Art*.

63 James Elkins, 'Different Horizons for the Concept of the Image', in: *On Pictures and Words that Fail Them*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 188–209.

years in the wake of prolific research from a range of regional positions and the translation of these findings through the medium of the art exhibition. Studies of modernism 'from the peripheries' have questioned its monolithic nature and argued for an expanded definition that would include the artistic experiments of modernist artists in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. The challenge, however, remains that of avoiding the pitfalls of recounting exclusively local histories, or the trap of treating regional or national cultures as closed units. This chapter seeks to bring regions and nations into a more dynamic, non-hierarchical and, importantly, non-homogenising relationship with each other, arguing that this cannot be adequately handled without simultaneously delving into localities and negotiating multiple scales – the local, regional, national, and global. The story of modernism recounted here takes South Asia as its focal point to argue against both a diffusionist view as well as one which proposes 'multiple' or 'alternative' or 'regional' modernisms. Rather, it looks at connected processes of translation and reconfiguration, at encounters of persons and narratives, as well as at endeavours inspired by idealist internationalism that in the end faltered in the face of cultural difference. Differences that unfolded in local or regional settings, frequently cut across the coloniser-colony divide, to reach out to both shared global horizons as well as individual micro-histories. The final section of the chapter explores the migratory fortunes of the category of the 'primitive', designated the alter ego of artistic modernism. It does so by plotting aspects of its conceptual history from different locations across Europe and Asia onto a single matrix, to then uncover the ambivalent nature of its appropriation by modernist artists on the Indian subcontinent, working in the interstices of anti-colonial nationalism and worldly cosmopolitanism.

Chapter four, 'Beyond Backwater Arcadias – Globalised Locality and Contemporary Art Practice', continues the 'periphery-in' approach by drawing attention to those sites of cultural action crucial to contemporary art that loosen the rigid linearity of narratives segregating contemporaneity from the modern. Such vibrant peripheries – the chapter shows – produce both novel art as well as a critical discourse and therefore demand a fresh optic to theorise the context within which artistic projects as well as conceptual insights are born. They serve as a locus of the transculturation of the avant-garde as it becomes global. The quest for artistic selfhood in postcolonial contexts – here too the focus is on South Asia – has involved a staggering transformation of codes and media initiatives in which globalised locality constitutes a space to rethink tradition beyond the predicament of being always 'somebody's other'.[64] Drawing on the work of a handful of artists, the chapter fleshes out how a more politicised engagement with the dilemmas of the contemporary – induced by the crisis of liberal democracies, mass migration, and the spectacular regimes of global capitalism – has made contemporary art practice in a postcolonial nation-state a domain to explore forms of identity beyond the nation. Singling out the work of individual artists here – and in other sections of the book – is not to signal towards a return to a biographical, more often than

---

64   Rustom Bharucha, 'Somebody's Other: Disorientations in the Cultural Politics of Our Times', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 29 (3), 1994: 105–10.

not celebratory mode of art history that treats the work of the single artist as the pinnacle of a creative process. Rather, facets of an artist's work are brought into relationship with other works and concepts in vectors that invite further exploration. The international spirit of global exchange has on the one hand encouraged transcultural affiliations and forms of co-production as ways to resist complicity with global capital. At the same time, such affiliations and the circulation of ideas remain to a lesser or greater degree dependent on big capital that sustains enterprises such as biennials and a globalised network of exhibitions, galleries, and art publishing.

Chapter five, 'When Art Embraces the Planet: The Contemporary Exhibition Form and the Challenge of Connected Histories', revisits the famous – also controversial – Paris exhibition of 1989, *Magiciens de la Terre*, conceptualised as the first planetary show of contemporary art, which at the same time sought to challenge the conventions of exhibition-making within the narrow confines of the art world and its modernist taxonomic frames. The analysis asks whether incorporating art from beyond the West within contemporary exhibition circuits can engender a discursive space to remap cultural geographies and theorise the dystopian/disjunctive condition of contemporaneity, or does it merely answer global capitalism's need for new commodities? Do new boundaries come into being in the wake of the connectivity that dissolves older ones? My investigation moves from the centre back to the periphery: it follows the bold topography of *Magiciens* across continents to those sites where the works that had travelled to Paris were produced and anchored, and to examine their post-*Magiciens* lives. My urge is to read objects, their producers and curators coevally, while restoring to different sites their particular historicity. The example of South Asia and its archives has been used to draw out the complex histories of cultures that live in a permanent and fluctuating relationality with one another, and whose dynamics get lost when we exclusively attend to dismantling the centrality of the so-called West, even if to castigate its cultural biases. These multi-scalar stories sensitise us to new faultlines within the domain of the contemporary, and to the complexity of inclusion as a curatorial strategy. Tracing a connected history of the first 'whole earth show'[65] in turn draws our attention to the emergence of another transcultural category, that of the 'global Indigenous' that has come to serve as an umbrella term for Indigenous art practices from across the divide of North and South, of settler-colonies and postcolonial nations.

Finally, the Postscript looks ahead to a fresh transition already under way – from the global to the planetary. Anthropogenic climate change, also described as a 'crisis of culture', has propelled the humanities towards the sciences, now brought under the rubric of 'planetary humanities'.[66] The implications of this radical turn ask us to recalibrate our understanding of culture by breaking out of Enlightenment ontologies that separate nature from culture. Could the transcultural, in turn, be re-envisioned to incorporate an all-embracing matrix

65 Benjamin Buchloh, 'The Whole Earth Show: An Interview with Jean-Hubert Martin', *Art in America*, vol. 77 (5), 1989, pp. 150–59, 211, 213.

66 See note 2.

of relationships wherein forms arise in a conjoint activity between human and non-human actors? And what would this imply for doing art history in a planetary, non-anthropocentric mode? These are some preliminary reflections that point in the direction of a new project to think the future of art history under the aegis of a new planetary consciousness.