

EDITORIAL

SITUATING ART'S HISTORIES: THE POLITICS AND PARADOXES OF GLOBALIZING

By now, it is a widely accepted fact that, all of the best intentions notwithstanding, many of the efforts toward inclusivity and diversity in the production and presentation of art, as well as in reflection on it, have often resulted in paradoxical and problematic attempts. Avoiding assimilation of otherness and 'difference' into the mainstream contemporary and with it, "escorting 'otherness' into capital"¹, are key problematics when it comes to globalizing art and its histories. From curators, artists, and art institutions using the notion of difference for symbolic and monetary capital to the prestige accredited to academics writing on 'new' and uncharted topics and territories; the issues are almost always the same: how can we move away from the imperial logics that only seem to reproduce and redistribute the same dynamics of privilege?

The original intention of our issue was to specifically grapple with art *history*, and the question whether any 'studies' on art could possibly "emancipate themselves from their own epistemic violence". However, from the very start we realized that any 'objective' knowledge production pursued within academia is so deeply rooted in western epistemologies that prioritize logocentric rationalization and objectification, that this issue would surely reiterate previous attempts; it would be faulty by default, yet another echo of the same ever-unanswered questions. And to be sure, by initiating and perpetuating a discussion within the confines of an academic journal we step into many of the same pitfalls and enact a gatekeeper function that is very much part of the problem at hand here.

At the same time, however, it became clear that one of the affordances of our position was the possibility to historicize and denaturalize the forms of reflection and knowledge collected under the header of 'art history'. If there is a need to inscribe the art historian in their own systems of knowledge production and to render explicit this system's political implications, then what better place to start from than the pages of an art historical journal? Such an immanent critique is necessarily problematic, flawed, and compromised; and as such, its value lies precisely in the exploration of its own limitations and shortcomings.

Thinking through these complications, issues of accessibility, selection, and representation continue to come to the fore. Who is the art historian? How was this subject produced and sustained, throughout histories of colonialism and after? Who gets to study, who gets to historicize, and what objects and practices are deemed worthy of such study and historicization?

(fig. 1) Further, what are the motivations and politics of 'global art history' today? Such a line of questioning has prompted us to examine historiographies and practices of canonization in art (history), but also to reflect on

¹ Barabara Kruger, 'Statement on "Magiciens de la Terre"' in: Lucy Steeds et al. (eds), *Making Art Global (Part 2) 'Magiciens de la Terre' 1989*, London: Afterall, 2011, p. 286.

methodologies and to question taken-for-granted terminologies. Concepts of the 'global' and of 'globalization', for instance, have become so commonplace and so exempt from critical scrutiny that it proves worthwhile to remember that they were borrowed—and were borrowed in particular ways—from sociology, political economy, and anthropology, among other disciplines.

In that spirit, the first article of this issue delves into such globalization discourses from the 1980s and 1990s. Tijen Tunali demonstrates how these discourses were injected into the art world and continue to inform art historical discourses today. She reviews how certain terms and theories became fashionable among curators, were emptied from their political content, and were, as a result, depoliticized. Tunali demonstrates how, in the early days of the 'global turn' in art and art history, important questions stemming from postcolonial theories—questions of marginalization and difference, periphery and centre, local and global, representation and (self-)exoticization—ended up having more of a symbolic impact rather than a 'material' influence.

We continue with another contribution centred around the historiography of the global art discourse(s) through an interview with professor Kitty Zijlmans. Zijlmans, who initiated new directions for studying art history at Leiden University and co-authored the influential book *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* with Wilfried Van Damme in 2008, shares some of her reservations concerning the methodological tools and 'lenses' of traditional art history. She reflects upon the importance of terminology when writing and undertaking 'world art studies' and reminds us that, despite the many books and articles dedicated to these issues, there is still a lot of work to be done.

As an academic or actor in the art world, changing perspectives on (delicate) issues is sometimes necessary. In his article dealing with the challenges of writing on the history of performance art in Asia (with a focus on China and Indonesia), Thomas Berghuis sets out with a (self-)critical anecdote that reveals the necessity of occasionally re-evaluating one's viewpoints. In what follows, he argues that the unsatisfactory historicization of performance art in the region is largely due to the fact that the very concept of 'performance art' itself was developed in relation to western practices. As such, it is often not sufficiently attuned to non-western traditions and to local conceptions of and discourses on the performative. His article presents an attempt to historicize Asian performance art in a manner that avoids these pitfalls.

The notions of conceptual transferability and translatability are also of central importance to the contribution by Charlotte Bank. Her article discusses the diverging meanings ascribed to terms such as 'committed' and 'critical' art in various non-western contexts, more specifically in localities such as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. Here, an examination of the Arabic term *al-fann al-multazim* (a literal translation of the French *art engagé*) reveals some of the complexities of transposing terminologies and concepts from one context to another—complexities which are specifically outspoken when comparing dictatorial regimes with societies that pride themselves on

being 'liberal democracies'.

Hinting at what in the subsequent contribution will be discussed as local-to-local connections, a constellation of paintings by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu and Gordon Hookey is included here so as to exemplify ways of seeing and modes of enquiry beyond eurocentrism, both in art historical discourse and in curatorial practice. A short introduction situates these bodies of work in their respective historical, social, and geographical contexts, and attempts to elucidate the relations between these very different yet closely affiliated forms of history painting.

In his article, Andrew Gayed observes that "globalizing and decentring histories needs to be more integrative, and incorporate fully the histories of multiple locales in order to examine how they speak to one another and engage with each other in terms of their own relationships to power and representation." He proposes the concept of the Islamicate as one possible way of undoing the centre-periphery binary that persists in many attempts to broaden the disciplinary scope of art history. The Islamicate, he argues, allows for the establishment of local-to-local connections and comparisons, and therefore opens up the possibility of an art history that connects similar yet dissimilar locales. In so doing, it eclipses the double bind between narratives that are global in their scope yet lack fine-grainedness and micro-histories that are concise yet leave the larger frameworks and methodologies of art history as a discipline intact.

Other practices of decentring may be found in collaborative modes of writing. Eva-Maria Troelenberg and Sria Chatterjee's dialogical contribution enacts an alternative to the singular authorial viewpoint. Through their case studies they propose a topological approach to art history that opens up practices that go beyond the discourse on the global by re-conceptualizing what we consider to be art history's sources, material, topics, and methods. While one case study looks at historiographies of representation and the entanglement of human and natural histories, the other looks at the geo-rhetorics of space by making links to migration as well as sustainable architectural practices. By bringing together these expanded hermeneutic understandings they suggest an "extended epistemic skill-set" that is able to borrow from a variety of disciplines.

While discussions on the eurocentric and colonial origins of the institution of art history in Europe may have been easily but unjustly relegated to the margins, in settler-colonial societies the confrontation between 'settler art historians' and 'indigenous art' is pertinent. By making these positions explicit, art histories are instantly politicized and specified. Challenging the limitations of western art history by acknowledging Indigenous art histories, and methodologies and other ways of understanding or 'sensing' art is the purpose of the article by Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll and Damian Skinner. The authors assert that, as methodological discussions are part and parcel of art history as a discipline, "settler or indigenous art history is not an array of alternative approaches to art, but 'a continuous unfolding of a complex conversation'".

The question of methodology is crucial in any attempt at establishing more diversified knowledges in art, art histories, and their curricula. However, relying on everyday situations in the art history classroom, Katayoun Arian argues that despite the best of intentions, a discrepancy persists between academic departments' self-understanding and self-presentation, and what happens on the ground. Arian touches upon some of the deficiencies of western (and increasingly neoliberal) art history departments, the lack of expertise and of sensibilities, as well as of access to the tools and methodologies appropriate to a global art history. She demonstrates how these present very real challenges to the ambition to globalize, not to mention decolonize, art history.

One of the assumptions underlying this publication in its entirety is that art history, as an academic discipline, is constantly (re)defined through inclusion and exclusion. In her curatorial practice as founding director of The 21st Century Museum, Janna el Isa wants to reconsider the role of the public museum in light of its connections to global societies, diverse communities, and urban realities. In her contribution to this issue, el Isa discusses her project *Black Presence at the Sugar Palace*, and the ways in which this project challenged conventional understandings of who and what gets to constitute the norm in what we understand to be public spaces.

Present in many of the articles of this issue, is a tension between an immanent, internal European critique of eurocentrism by its own means and methods, versus a thinking that confronts and invites other perspectives. Reflecting upon the colonial politics of time and how it has affected the epistemological grounds of art and art history as a discipline, Rolando Vázquez characterizes the criterion of contemporaneity in art as an extension of the temporal logic of modernity that fetishizes the new and is colonial to its core. He proposes a decolonial aesthesis which allows for questions of justice to come to the fore by rendering tangible how the past configures the present.

Dealing with contemporaneity and its relation to the past, present, and future, but this time through a different medium, Kader Attia's work *Self-Destruction* on our cover page comes to exemplify the multiple entanglements that the issue as a whole attempts to deal with. A powerful iron propeller which appears to be flying and in motion but is at the same time also fixed and immovable by concrete, the work delivers the perfect analogy to the paradoxes of globalizing.

Throughout these various contributions, several issues persist. First, we should note that one thing holding together the diverse articles in this publication is an engagement with art history on a methodological level. Such a methodological undertaking is necessary in order to evaluate, critique, and propose new pathways for the academic discipline, but it also tends to imply a move away from aesthetic experience, and from a more direct involvement with particular objects, artworks, and other cases. Many of the reflections brought forward in this publication tend towards a 'meta' perspective. Such a perspective stands in stark contrast to the attunement and sensitivity to

the everyday and lived, concrete experience that characterizes the politics underpinning this issue, thus begging the question of how they are to be translated and incorporated into art-historical practice, both in the academy and in the institutional field.

This remove from direct engagement with more accustomed art-historical cases is worth mentioning for two related reasons. Firstly, because a defining characteristic and quality of art history as a discipline has been its emphasis on object-centred methodologies and research. And secondly, because it showcases the proximity of questions concerning aesthetic experience to issues concerning subjectivity, and positionality. Such issues are crucial to this publication, with perhaps the most vital question being: whose particular aesthetic experiences qualify as the basis for legitimate knowledge (often with pretensions to universality) in art history, and whose perspectives and experiences remain marginalized? As a result, most of the authors in this issue find it necessary to tackle certain aspects of whiteness and western epistemologies—and, by extension, to address their own situatedness within or in relation to those epistemologies.

Via this epistemological route the articles do at times point towards practical suggestions. A direction that can, perhaps, be deduced from this issue as a whole is that there is a need to move away from ahistorical, apolitical, a-material viewpoints. In order to do so, the role of the art historian could be one of an interpreter looking through different perspectives; an interpreter who can contextualize materially and discursively and trace through the past and present; and who is politically attuned not to transform new-found epistemes into instruments or tokens of power.

As a result, although we hope that this publication does not convey a sense of compactness or completion—let alone the false sense of achievement that can result from having touched upon an urgent debate—we do want to conclude by making an argument for such *situated* art histories. We hope to have made a convincing attempt in favour of art historical narratives that point to the paradoxes and politics of the global by looking first and foremost at the positionalities of their own various interlocutors and the kinds of knowledges that art produces and values. Undoubtedly, this also opens up a set of questions concerning ethics for practitioners of art history. Such questions of ethics are probably deserving of a publication all of their own, and certainly we at *Kunstlicht* feel we have only just begun to reflect on them with some consistency with the making of this issue. It is our wish and desire, however, to integrate these reflections in our future collective thought processes as editors, as well as in our everyday working practices and relations.

Finally we would like to thank Jelle Bouwhuis, who played a key role in initiating our conversations on this issue and took part in its early stages of conception.

On behalf of *Kunstlicht*,
Rosa te Velde, Steyn Bergs, and Iris Pissaride



↑ fig. 1 Art history classes at Stellenbosch University. Departmental brochure, Department van Beeldende Kunste, Universiteit van Stellenbosch, 1970. Special thanks to Danielle Becker, who used this image in her PhD thesis (*South African Art History: The possibility of decolonising a discourse*, 2017) and cleared the copyrights from Stellenbosch University.