

The “Global Art History and the Peripheries” conference review

by Foteini Vlachou

Two months ago in Paris (12-14 June), the “[Global Art History and the Peripheries](#)” international conference took place, supported by the Institut national d’histoire de l’art (INHA), the Terra Foundation for American Art, and the École normale supérieure (ENS). Resembling more an intensive workshop than a traditional conference (one can peruse the list of abstracts [here](#)), “Global Art History and the Peripheries” counted with the participation of a number of scholars from Poland, Sweden, Lebanon, Italy, Romania, Great Britain, the USA, and France itself. The conference was organized by the Artl@s project, and more specifically by three members of the team, its two directors, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Catherine Dossin, and Michela Passini, responsible for the *Patrimoines* section of the project. The [Artl@s project](#) itself was founded in 2009 by Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel at the École normale supérieure de Paris, as an attempt to eschew traditional approaches in the study of art history and to focus instead on quantitative, spatial and geo-historical methods of analysis.

The “Global Art History and the Peripheries” conference could be associated with other recent initiatives to define global art history, and grapple with the challenges that it presents for the shape of the discipline today. The *Is Art History Global?* volume, edited by James Elkins in 2007 (you can read his “Art History as a Global Discipline” [here](#)), and the [2011 Clark Conference](#) “In the Wake of the Global Turn: Propositions for an ‘Exploded’ Art History without Borders”, convened by Jill Casid and Aruna D’Souza, are the most important recent examples (you can read D’Souza’s review of the conference [here](#) and the Clark Art Institute has made available a series of videos from the conference [here](#)).

The conference started with Joyeux-Prunel’s presentation where she touched upon the basic problems of dealing with art in the peripheries and the range of disciplinary and methodological solutions one could apply to these: disciplinary migration (to anthropology, namely); post-colonial and/or subaltern point of view; relationship of centers to/peripheries (transcultural approach); escaping counter-imperialism; ancient and new

peripheries; and changes brought to the dominant narratives of art history once peripheries are integrated in them.

Joyeux-Prunel, jointly with Catherine Dossin, also presented their proposal towards a geopolitical history of modernism. Citing several writers as sources of inspiration for this project (such as Braudel, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Yves Lacoste), they structured their proposal along several, interconnected axes: the prosopography of modernist groups; the comparative chronology of cycles and events; the quantitative analysis of collecting practices; the study of the point of origin of international exhibitions (through [BasArt](#), the collaborative base for geo-referenced data that the Artl@s project has been developing); the study of middlemen and their motivations; translations and adaptations (this is especially important for the interdisciplinary scope of the project that aims to encompass literary as well as visual history); and, provincialism and the end of modernism. Applying these methods in art history, would allow for the “writing [of] a circulatory and inclusive global modern history of art” (to cite the two authors).

Michela Passini presented her research project, focusing on centers and peripheries in the context of a series of exhibitions surveying national art in the Jeu de Paume museum, during the interwar period (1921-1939). Including a number of fourteen countries, Passini discussed some aspects of her research involving national stereotypes and their reception within the artistic metropolis of Paris. She stressed, among other things, the importance of the notion of the *beginning(s)* of national art: How, for example, the Italian art exhibition ‘started’ with the display of Roman statues, while for the exhibition of Danish art the foundation of the Royal Danish Academy of Portraiture, Sculpture, and Architecture in the eighteenth century was chosen as its inaugural point.

A number of communications on specific peripheries and case studies presented a wide range of methodological and theoretical problems. Carmen Popescu discussed architectural history and practice in Eastern Europe, the methodological problems ensuing from its geographical and disciplinary marginality, while concluding that global art history tends to be normative as

a discourse; Olivier Marcel, next year's post-doctoral fellow of the Artl@as project, brought his insight as a geographer to the study of the cultural environment of Nairobi, insisting on the dialectical relationship between mobility and periphery and warning against the danger of approaching 'periphery' as a confined space; Jérôme Bazin examined the use of realism as a stylistic strategy deployed in the service of communist universality, in a woodcut produced by Lothar Kittelman in the GDR, about the 1973 Chilean coup d'état; Mathilde Arnoux, as the principal investigator of the "[To each his own reality. The notion of real in art in France, West Germany and East Germany and Poland from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s](#)" research program, analyzed artistic relationships in four countries and the ways they undercut traditional categories, centering on the concept of the 'real'; Ewa Bobrowska studied the community of Polish artists in Paris covering the period 1890-1914 and raising interesting questions regarding identity and nationality (she grouped artists according to the center towards which they gravitated, i.e. "Munich artists", "Paris artists"); Annika Öhrner discussed the presence of Swedish artists in Paris (1908-1925), emphasizing the importance of gender and sexual orientation as determinants of a marginality that does not need to be defined as geographical, as well as the necessity to re-imagine Paris as the diversified site of several avant-garde *microspaces* (instead of as a monolithic structure), along the model of Piotr Piotrowski's "horizontal art history"; Derek Sayer challenged the view of Prague as peripheral, addressing it instead as the site of an alternative model of avant-garde, one which allowed drastically different relationships between fine and applied arts, and popular culture. Other notable case studies included Kristine Khouri's examination of the Sultan Gallery in Kuwait, mapping the contours of Arab art and identity, Rasha Salti's fascinating study of the International Art Exhibition in Solidarity with Palestine (1978) and Zahia Ramani's presentation of the "[Arts et architecture dans la mondialisation](#)" research project of the Institut national d'histoire de l'art, raising eventually the problem of terminology and the different contents of the words 'mondialisation' in French and 'globalization' in English, that retains its negative associations with capitalism and neoliberalism.

The plenary speakers also presented a wide array of current issues and methodological problems. David Cottington talked about transnational (British and French) and

interdisciplinary (literary and artistic) considerations when it comes to the study of the avant-garde; he discussed the importance of self-understanding as a criterion of peripheral status (that is, identifying oneself as belonging to or originating from a periphery); the problem of different hierarchies (cultural vs. economic/political), and the relationships cultural centers (such as Paris) and economic/political ones (such as London) developed during a specific period. Cottington also touched upon the subject of the professionalization of the avant-garde, the aesthetic rivalries between writers and painters, and the necessity of a truly interdisciplinary study that links literature and painting (much as the Artl@s project proposes to do), since the writers were often at the forefront of modernist avant-garde.

Catherine Grenier talked about the new presentation of the permanent collection of the Centre Georges Pompidou, to be launched in October 2013. This offered a unique glimpse at how curatorial practices can contribute towards shaping and enriching the dominant narrative of art history, but also at the practical limitations a major cultural institution has to face (inevitably, the choices reflect the holdings of the museum, and can never be all-inclusive). The project was conceived in an effort to display plural modernities, diversifying the exhibits geographically (with rooms on artists such as the Uruguayan Torres García, the Cuban Wifredo Lam, the Algerian Fatima Haddad [Baya], the Brazilian modernist movement around the Manifesto Antropófago etc.), as well as in terms of material and technique (emphasis on design, photography, journals etc.). ‘Traditional’ categorizations will be in many cases preserved (surrealism, constructivism, social realism, expressionism, abstraction etc.), expanding to include previously ignored or marginalized geographic areas (for example, Amadeo de Souza Cardoso will be exhibited in the ‘international futurism’ room, just to cite an overlooked European example from Portugal).

Piotr Piotrowski gave what was perhaps the most openly political talk in a conference where political issues abounded. One of the most interesting notions introduced in his lecture was that of “active reception”, according to which a periphery is not viewed as passively submitting to external influences (a passivity that is implied in the term ‘reception’), but its culture seen as actively shaped through choices, rejections, appropriations etc. Most

importantly, Piotrowski raised the question of the political role of the enterprise of global art history, which he considered neither as a “neoliberal offer” nor as post-modernist. He considered the possibility of art history participating in the movement of alter-globalization, and how academic and curatorial practices (deeming the latter more visible in the community) could contribute to it. A telling example was the ethical issues raised when dealing with censorship: Piotrowski mentioned a lecture he had recently attended in China on the representations of the Tiananmen Square, that avoided the question of the 1989 protests by conveniently stopping in the 1970s without providing a plausible reason for the choice of the time limits of the subject under discussion.

James Elkins, unfortunately only present via video-conference due to the air traffic controllers strike in Paris, concentrated on the cultural diversity of art history practices all over the world and the various problems posed by them. Georgian art history with highly selective references to Western canonical art history, or translations of key art historical texts into Chinese (and the logic behind those selections), were only two examples of these practices. The question that strongly emerged was whether art historians should accept these differences as constitutive of local specificities or adhere to the same academic standards for art history all over the world. Interestingly, Elkins, much like most North American and West European scholars, situated the periphery in the non-western world, thus seeing global art history as the attempt to embrace what was previously ignored by Western art history. The conference concluded with a round-table, a discussion on the problems and possibilities of teaching global art history.

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The conference was dedicated to modernism, with one notable exception: Sophie Raux, who presented a research project of the Interdisciplinary Cluster for the Advancement of Visual Studies (Lille), a database of sales of paintings in 64 European cities for the period 1700-1799 and the reconstruction of a specific location of eighteenth-century Parisian art market (Pont Notre Dame, using a 3D model). The domination of modernism reflected the interests and fields of specialization of the organizers and participants, although the usefulness of the ‘global’ for the study of these periods and phenomena was apparent. Whether one should use

– and exactly how – the ‘global’ for periods antedating the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was left open for debate. Can we better comprehend the Mediterranean in late antiquity following this model? Would the art produced during the Portuguese maritime expansion profit from insights into the global? The conference was notable not only for championing methods (mapping, quantitative analysis etc.) that still, for the most part, elude art history, but for its unwillingness to give up on the validity of the ‘periphery’ as an analytical category. As various participants stressed the historical and geographical fluidity of these identities, avoiding the static and binary opposition of center and periphery and the concept of linear, ideological time, the necessity to redefine the ‘periphery’ in the global age emerged clearly.

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