

# Contemporary art and the museum in the global age

## El arte contemporáneo y el museo en la era global

**Hans Belting**

Recibido: 01-Junio-2012 | Aceptado: 29-Julio-2012 | Publicado: 30-Agosto-2012

© El autor(es) 2012. | Trabajo en acceso abierto disponible en (🌐) [www.disputatio.eu](http://www.disputatio.eu) bajo una licencia (CC)

La copia, distribución y comunicación pública de este trabajo será conforme la nota de copyright. Consultas a (✉) [boletin@disputatio.eu](mailto:boletin@disputatio.eu)

### 1. Introduction

**F**OR A LONG TIME, ART MUSEUMS SEEMED TO HAVE BEEN BORN with a secure identity safeguarded by their designation to exhibit art and even to provide art with the necessary ritual of visibility. Yet now, as we embark upon the global age, they face a new challenge. It remains to be seen whether the art museum, as an institution with a history looking back at least two hundred years in the West, is prepared for the age of globalization. There is no common notion of art that necessarily applies to all societies around the world. Contemporary art, which is what I will concentrate on in what follows, raises new and difficult questions. On the one hand, art production as a contemporary practice is expanding around the globe. On the other hand, precisely this recent explosion seems to threaten the survival of any safe notion of art, provided one still exists even in the West. Granted, new art museums have been established in many parts of the world: But will the institution survive this expansion? The presence of non-Western contemporary art in biennials and private collections is not a clear indication of whether its institutionalization in permanent and public collections will follow or whether, on the contrary, the new art production will undermine the profile of the museum. In other parts of the world, art museums either lack any history or are suffering from the history of colonialization. In short, I will analyze the museum in the light of a branch of *contemporary art* that I call *global art*.

---

H. Belting (✉)  
GAM, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie  
Karlsruhe, Germany  
email: [gam@zkm.de](mailto:gam@zkm.de)



AUTOR INVITADO

Let me, however, briefly mention the occasion for which I first prepared this paper. In 2006, the Vatican Museums in Rome called a conference on their 500th anniversary entitled: «The idea of the museum: identity, roles and perspectives». This occasion provided me with the opportunity to entertain the question of why the Catholic Church, as a living religious institution, entertains art museums in the first place. The answer is readily available from historical arguments. The Vatican, as a whole, is a living institution and, at the same time, a museum. It is a museum that holds collections and that also serves as a site of memory. But the issue, nevertheless, deserves a closer look. The Vatican Museums did not start as the Church's treasury, but, on the contrary, as a collection of antique statuary, which may seem a surprising choice for the Church. The sculptures of ancient gods in the collection were no longer identified as pagan, but instead, were redefined as works of art. Thus, the collection's aim was to build up a new idea of «art» that would authorize even the sight of naked pagan gods. It was necessary for the collected items to have first gone out of use in order to acquire the status of art, which, in turn, relied on their museum status.

Before leaving the Vatican, let me look at the same phenomenon from another angle. Outside the museum doors, the Church favored the living veneration of holy images that never entered the category of art. They were looked at with the eyes of faith but did not require a taste for art. For many centuries, Rome was the Mecca of the Catholic Church; every Christian was expected to worship the Holy Face at St. Peter's, the «true icon»<sup>1</sup>, at least once in his or her life. Nowadays, attention to such images has lost much of its importance, with the exception of global attractions, such as the «Holy Shroud» at Turin. But the Church, it appears, has rediscovered the need to visualize its practice with a new emphasis on images. In the West, where Reformation and Counter-Reformation have left the process of modernization with dark memories and also fears, even art is being reconsidered as a new ally to mobilize the faithful.

But I doubt that this is a wise choice. In fact, the Church is currently experiencing the pressure of mass media whose visual presence in everyday life has changed the world. The former Pope has brilliantly served this tele-presence by instrumentalizing his own icon: But this process is irreversible. Films have already proven to be strong forces in global missionary projects, mostly in U.S.-American hands. Marshall McLuhan, the prophet of the Media Age, was a faithful Catholic who dreamed of the end of the Gutenberg Galaxy, understood as a Reformation heritage, and proclaimed the rise of a new media culture in the spirit of an all-embracing, and visual, ecumenical departure<sup>2</sup>. Art was not part of this vision. And the museum, to which I now come back, is certainly at the other end of the road.

---

1. Hans Belting, *Likeness and presence* (Chicago 1994)

2. Derrick de Kerckhove, *La civilisation vidéo-chrétienne* (Paris 1990) with reference to McLuhan

## 2. Ethnic arts

In order to pursue my main topic, allow me to now make a dangerous move and link the dichotomy of living practice and museum presence that we have encountered in the Catholic Church to the ominous destiny of the so-called ethnic arts. Certainly, I do not want to risk misunderstandings and oversimplification, but it may not be too farfetched to recall that ethnic artifacts were never created as «art» in the Western sense. They served ethnic rituals, which, in many ways, can be regarded as indigenous religions. It is well known that the theft of such items, which ended up in Western collections, together with the missionary zeal of the colonizers, eradicated living religions. The museum thus became a threat for the survival of whole cultures, and the art world appropriated the material culture of many religions.

Even in their countries of origin, ethnic artifacts looked strange and misused when they entered colonial type museums. Local audiences could no longer recognize masks that lost their reference to living bodies, appearing as useless objects in a collection where the former owners had even lost control of the objects' protected meaning. The problem, moreover, was the clash with memorial strategies of the West, which resulted in reification and objecthood while indigenous memory could survive only in living performance. The loss of accessibility was understood as deprivation, and the colonial museum turned into a «cemetery» of lifeless things, to quote Mamadou Diawara (p. in this volume). In postcolonial times, counter strategies have therefore led to the rededication of museums as so-called «people's museums». It is the purpose of such projects to «return the museum to the people», as Bogumil Jewsiewicki describes his two projects in Haiti and in the Congo (p. of this volume). It is, however, not at all certain that local audiences would want to have back museums that were not their concern in the first place.

Also in the West, where ethnic arts were introduced as a foreign currency of art, the museum question became an issue of endless controversy. Two types of museums soon testified against each other. The question remained open whether a beautiful mask should enter an *ethnographic museum* or an *art museum*<sup>3</sup>. In the one case, it was denied its place in art in the sense of «world art». In the other case, it lost its ties with its culture of origin and became indifferent to any local meaning. After a long and heated debate, the destination of the so-called «Arts premiers», a new label for «primitive art», was settled with the creation of the Musée du Quai Branly; a suspiciously neutral name. It took over collections that had once been in the Musée des Colonies and also some from the Musée de l'Homme<sup>4</sup>. The new museum is a thinly disguised art museum, disguised in that it conceals the former division between two types of museums. After its opening, the topography of memory was neatly distributed over distinct institutions in Paris. The new museum assembles the heritage of Africa and Oceania, and the Musée Guimet presents the arts of Asia. The Louvre owns those

3. cfr. Hans Belting, «*The exhibition of culture?*»

4. Bernard Dupaigne, *Le scandale des arts premiers. La véritable histoire* (Paris 2006)

antiquities, including Egyptian, which the French regard as their own heritage, but the new Islamic department opens a window to a larger world.

This place of the new museum in a colonial map, a map in the brain, is confirmed by an absence that nobody seems to notice. I am speaking of the absence of contemporary art from those parts of the world where the artifacts of colonial and pre-colonial times were produced. This absence has many reasons among which the resistance of indigenous contemporary artists to be classified as ethnic is one of the best. Nevertheless, it marks a gap that reveals a global problem in the art scene. Where do those non-Western artists belong who just recently were «included» in the art market? I would venture to argue that contemporary art, in a global context, invades the place of former ethnic production. This argument needs to be shielded from many possible misunderstandings. I am not saying that ethnic production simply continues in what we currently accept as art. Rather, a gap opens between such indigenous traditions that are exhausted and interrupted, and, on the other hand, something else that still needs definition and, as yet, has usually not entered museums: contemporary non-Western art.

### 3. Contemporary Art

Why do I select a phenomenon that is still not a serious concern for the majority of art museums today? And how does current contemporary art differ from contemporary art twenty years ago? We have witnessed a lot of redefinitions of art production in the last five decades. There was the great rebellion in the 1960s, which some understand as the rise of a second modernity. Classical exhibition art, staged in the «white cube»<sup>5</sup>, was devalued, and performance became one of the art world's major activities in the art world. In a next step, we saw the introduction of new media such as video installation and so on. But such turns usually happened in the Western art world while now newcomers from the former «third world» are taking the lead in the course of events. At least, nothing of similar importance in terms of its impact on the market is present in the West. Take only the Chinese invasion and its hot acclamation by Western collectors.

In order to analyze the significance of this phenomenon, let me devise a map of ideas and terms to which it relates in often contradictory ways. There is the ambivalent history of modernism, which nowadays meets with resistance or open opposition. Artists, more often than not, struggle to retrieve the hegemonic claims of this Western heritage, the latter being an unwelcome burden for latecomers who cannot situate themselves anywhere in the history of modernism. Some seek an exit from this heritage or search for alternative genealogies that offer possible definitions. Modernism often functioned as a barrier protecting Western art from contamination by ethnic or popular art, and it marginalized local production as unprofessional. In response, non-Western art sometimes acted with an antithesis to the claim of universalism that was inherent in modernism.

5. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (New York 1984)

Modernism, as an idea, claimed to be of universal authority and thereby, in fact, exerted colonial power. *Modernist art* is best described as *avant-garde art* reflecting the idea of linear progress, conquest, and novelty, thus testifying against its own culture as a dead and unwelcome past. Avant-garde, which as we should note was originally a military term, made it possible to measure progress and innovation within the art context. Therefore, *art history* became necessary, which, in turn, needed *art museums* to display art history's materials and results<sup>6</sup>. The method and the institution emerged simultaneously and were both modern in origin and intention. It is therefore not possible to simply transfer them to other cultures without a loss of meaning. *Art history* and *ethnology* were like two sides of the same coin. They covered a neatly divided world as defined by Hegel's «Pale of History», which meant that history existed only in the West<sup>7</sup>. Seen in this light, non-Western museums appeared to be inadequate copies of their Western models.

Let me now introduce *contemporary art*, a term that still causes a lot of confusion as it is traditionally identified with the most recent production of modern art, at least in the West where this chronological or avant-garde distinction resisted even postmodern notions and remained valid until quite recently. Yet beyond the West, contemporary art has a very different meaning that is slowly also seeping into the Western art scene. There, it is hailed as a liberation from modernism's heritage and is identified with local art currents of recent origin. In such terms, it offers revolt against both art history, with its Western-based meaning, and against ethnic traditions, which seem like prisons for local culture in a global world. There are reasons behind this double resistance that deserve our attention.

On the one hand, there was no art history in most parts of the world; therefore, it could not be appropriated like a ready-made. On the other hand, ethnic arts and crafts, as the favorite child of colonial teachers and collectors, no longer continue as a living tradition even if they survive as a commodity for global tourism. «The death of authentic primitive art», to quote the title of a book by Shelly Errington, opens a space that contemporary art invades with its double character: as *post-historical*, with respect to the West, and *post-ethnic*, with respect to its own environments<sup>8</sup>. I do not say that this is a description of what is, but a description how artists nowadays *feel*. It seems that the history of art, for Western artists, has been felt as a similar burden as what ethnic tradition, for non-Western artists has meant. I also do not say that history only exists in the West and tradition only in other parts of the worlds. But the two labels have played a considerable role in building up a specific consciousness. In both respects, a new situation has arrived. It therefore makes sense that *contemporary art*, in many cases, is understood as synonymous with *global art*. Globalism, in fact, is almost an antithesis to universalism because it decentralizes a unified and uni-directional world view and allows for «multiple modernities», to quote the theme of a *Daedalus* issue dedicated to the topic in 2000. This also means that in the arts, the notion

6. Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism* (Chicago Univ. Press 2003)

7. Arthur C. Danto, *After the end of art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton 1997)

8. Shelly Errington, *The death of authentic primitive art and other tales of progress* (Univ. of Calif. Press 1998). cfr. Sally Price, *Primitive art in Civilized Places* (Chicago 1989) and R. Corbey, *Tribal Art Traffic* (Amsterdam 2000)

«modern» becomes a historical definition and accordingly loses the authority of a universal model. It might even appear as a past that is linked to the West, like other cultures view their own local pasts.

We have now reached a stage in our analysis where the concepts of modern (or modernism), contemporary, and global become relevant for museums, especially newly founded ones in non-Western parts of the world that have to represent such issues both by their collection and for a local audience. They are in a different situation than art fairs such as biennials, which are organized by individual curators, address individual collectors, and underlie the laws of the market, and are ephemeral events that can contradict any preceding exhibition without having to explain the change in direction. Museums, on the contrary, in principle, have to justify their collections and represent ideas that are broader than mere personal taste. Since they are official institutions, they are also subjected to public pressure, and must rely on support from funding authorities. They must therefore offer a program which, in this case, clarifies the constellation and local meaning of modern, contemporary, and global.

#### 4. The modernist myth and the «MoMA»

When looking back at the history of modernism, we cannot overlook the powerful role that museums have played in its expansion. I therefore would like to interrupt my analysis of the global with a chronicle of events that provides evidence of the institution's role in the history of modernism. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) is an obvious choice since it created the canon of modernist art some seventy years ago. It recently discovered its own past when it reopened its galleries in 2004. Modernism had meanwhile become a myth<sup>9</sup>. «The Modern», as it is called in New York, «made us modern», to quote a remark by Arthur C. Danto<sup>10</sup>. But we have to distinguish a *prewar* from a *postwar* modernism. The former was located in Europe, when making its appearance in an American museum. The latter came into being only in the U.S. It is only in postwar years that we can speak of «Western modernism» as a common space whose universalism, however, also served as a disguise for the new American hegemony. The MoMA was intended as both a universal and an American museum<sup>11</sup>.

When the MoMA re-opened its galleries in 2004, the double canon it had created surfaced in its main galleries. One floor was reserved for European modernism while the other floor, with few exceptions, presented American modernism. During the renovation period, a large part of the collection had been sent to Berlin where it became one of the greatest exhibition events ever to happen in Germany. This visit only confirmed the myth of the museum and the sacralization of modernism as a classical canon. In New York, the

9. John Elderfiel, ed., *Imagining the Future of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York 1998)

10. Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box* (New York 1992)

11. Hans Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece* (Chicago 2001) p. 362ff.

museum succumbed to the temptation to perform the history of the house and display its myth. The officials were well aware that they did, in a way, musealize their museum. They therefore announced a conference with the telling title «When was Modern Art? A contemporary question». I was invited to this conference whose rhetoric somehow disagreed with the reality of the house's new program. Contemporary art had always played a critical role in the acquisition politics of the house yet quite soon the gap emerging between modern and contemporary could no longer be closed.

I will now follow another line in my chronicle that allows us to remain in the same institution. It was in 1955, at the high tide of modernism, that Edward Steichen «created» a «photographic exhibition for the Museum of Modern Art», as the title says. It was *The Family of Man*, which would then travel around the globe<sup>12</sup>. For the first time, «the art of photography», to quote from the editorial, became the subject of a museum exhibition and, as such, invaded the modernist realms of painting and sculpture. The exhibition also broke with another rule by accepting amateur photographers alongside professionals. The aim was to offer a global view of what Steichen called «the essential oneness of mankind». Indeed, this show represented all cultures and all kinds of people but, seen in retrospect, it proves that at the time the camera was still mostly in Western hands. A Western gaze remained dominant in documenting the world. And the pseudo-innocent idealism was so obvious even in the pictures from America that Robert Frank, in the same year, attacked the project with his campaign of dirty images of *The Americans*, whose publication was originally forbidden in the U.S.<sup>13</sup>

Today, photography is a common feature of museum collections. But since the late 1960s, video has entered the art scene and as a time-based medium has challenged the museum's profile much more than photography. Low-cost video equipment had meanwhile become affordable for personal use. Its global distribution was also fostered by its relatively brief history in Western art, which made it attractive as a medium without the burden of art history<sup>14</sup>. The editorial in *Video Art*, the renowned anthology edited by Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot in 1976, insists on video's ability to recover images that had long been banned from art production. Such video images featuring either the living artists or their local environments seemed to open a global world with a full gamut of very different visual cultures as compared to a uniform technology. A year after the publication of the anthology, the Centre Pompidou opened: a new type of museum that also reserved space for «new media», offering a desperately awaited new dimension to late modern art. But it was not until 1997 that the ZKM in Karlsruhe made video and related media a prominent feature in a museum collection. In the present context, it is obvious how much the evolution of global art has profited from video and new technologies that are global by nature and do not depend on the genealogy of Western art history.

---

12. Edw. Steichen, *The Family of Man* (Catal. MoMa 1955)

13. Robert Frank, *The Americans* (Paris 1958, N.York, Grove Press 1959, re-edited Zurich 1997)

14. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot, ed., *Video Art* (London 1976)

## 5. The decline of modernism

It was again in the MoMA that William Rubin celebrated the modernist myth for the last time with two famous, complementary exhibitions, which showed a nostalgic longing for a lost history. I am speaking of the great Picasso show that opened in 1980, six years after the artist's death, and the show *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, which stirred still largely unconscious resistance in me when I saw it in 1984. The *Primitivism* exhibition could just as easily have been called «Picasso and Primitive Art»<sup>15</sup>. Its aim was to reconcile the two mainstream traditions of modern and ethnic art, but in fact, it once again reconfirmed the old dualistic perspective of «tribal art», as so-called «primitive» art was meanwhile called, whose masks and fetishes still functioned as «inspiration» for avant-garde art in the same way they had had nearly one hundred years before, in Picasso's early years. One could have likewise spoken of an appropriation of ethnic art in modern art history, meaning the influence of ethnic artifacts on modern artists, a process that amounted to the transformation of religious practice (collective) into artistic creation (individual).

It is nearly unconceivable that only five years separate Rubin's show from the project that Jean-Hubert Martin realized in 1989 in the Centre Pompidou with his exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre*<sup>16</sup>. This show cut the ties to the earlier project in that it presented non-Western production as *contemporary* rather than *primitive ethnic* art and did so for the first time on a global scale. Not only did Martin choose fifteen living artists from the so-called «third world», he also displayed them alongside an equal number of Western artists. With this juxtaposition, he intended to relate them in an imaginary dialogue rather than identify either as an «influence» on the other. Martin did not use the word «art» and instead applied the term «magic» in order to avoid confusion and criticism about mixing concepts. He nevertheless disappointed most critics, those in the West for undermining the autonomy of modern art and those from the third world for not having promoted their artists to the first ranks of modernism. He explained his exhibition as «une enquête sur la création dans le monde d'aujourd'hui»<sup>17</sup>. In retrospect, we have to credit him with having created the first event in the emerging new presence of contemporary global art.

Rasheed Araeen, who participated in the event, later objected that the show did not represent «the cultural heterogeneity of modernism from all over the world» and that it had stabilized the division in which «the *self* represented a modern, universal vision» and «the *others*» were still trapped «in their ethnic origin». He devoted the whole of the sixth issue of *Third Text* to a critique of the exhibition (p. in this volume). Two years before, in 1987, Araeen had founded this periodical in London «with the aim of providing a critical forum

15. William .Rubin, «Picasso». in Rubin,ed, «*Primitivism*» in *20th cent. Art. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York 1984), vol.I., p.241–340.

16. Thomas McEvilley, «Ouverture du piège, and Homi Baba,Hybridité,heterogenéité et culture contemporaine», in ed. Hubert Martin, *Les magiciens de la terre* (Centre G.Pompidou, Paris 1989), pp. 20 and 24.

17. Hubert, *ibid.*, p. 8 f.



for third-world perspectives on the visual arts», as he writes in the first editorial<sup>18</sup>. The magazine was to represent «a historical shift away from the center of the dominant culture to its periphery» and to view the center with critical eyes. In the first decade of its existence, *Third Text* was mainly «devoted to revealing the institutional closures of the art world and the artists they excluded, the second began the enquiry into (the new phenomenon) ...of the assimilation of the exotic Other into the new world art», as Sean Cubitt reminds us. A new type of «art-institutional racism» forced the newcomers «to see their work assimilated into the system.... For some artists, the struggle has led to a retreat from international arenas and a return to the local... Others have abandoned the concept of art altogether» and look for «alternative modes of cultural practice» in order to escape the assimilating forces of the art world.

On the other hand, the global space absorbs the privilege of representing history including the variant of art history in the Western world. It also threatens to undermine the system of the art world. The new presence of those who were formerly outsiders was not yet in sight when Araeen launched his project in 1987. In the meantime, art geography, too, has been changing rapidly, as is indicated by a new terminology. The term of the so-called third world no longer characterizes the new art geography. It now seems appropriate to speak of a «global South», as Beral Madra, the founder of the Istanbul Biennial calls it (p. ). The «global South» emerges as a new periphery in relation to other emerging centers with new economic power, (such as China), which rival the West in global dimensions. In this respect, the global art market has become a distorting mirror. Success in the market does not necessarily mean local acceptance in the societies whose problems are addressed by the local artists and vice versa. The art market and public acceptance are strangely divided. The market often deprives artists of their critical voice and their political significance, and their critical potential needs clients outside the «system» whose judgment is not neutralized by assimilated global art criticism.

Acceptance in the art scene was still the issue of Peter Weibel's 1996 Graz show *Inklusion: Exklusion*, which was an important step forward in discussing (and promoting?) such a change<sup>19</sup>. But «inclusion» (of whom and for what reasons?) happened only in the newly emerging, global exhibition culture, whereas acceptance in museum collections is another matter. The Graz exhibition succeeded in drawing «a new map of art in the era of postcolonialism», as the subtitle says. Nonetheless, «global migration», the second part of the subtitle, remains a personal experience. Migration is reflected in the artists' imagination and shapes individual memory. Museums, on the contrary, do not migrate (even if their collections travel), but have to shape a new audience or are themselves shaped by a local audience. But, then, how do museums lend themselves to globalization in the strict sense, if such a sense exists?

18. Rasheed Araeen, ed, *The Third Text Reader on Art, Culture and Theory* (London 2002), p.3ff. (Prologue by Sean Cubitt)

19. Peter Weibel, ed, *Inklusion: Exklusion* (Graz: Steirischer Herbst 1996)

## 6. The future of art museums

It may seem that «art» in the terms of Western modernity, in whatever application, has won the game and has even become a global experience, thus defeating ethnic production and leveling off any cultural difference. In this case, art museums would expect a global future where they look the same everywhere. But such a conclusion is premature and rests on superficial observations that conceal new and unexpected developments. Certainly, we watch the explosion of art museums in many parts of the world. They represent a new geography of institutions that sometimes are less than ten years old. They usually reflect economic prosperity and serve the representation (and global share value) of local capital. Thus, they often are sponsored by big companies with global investment, whereby the museum aspect is assigned only a secondary role within a given foundation, a situation already ridiculed by the description «restaurant with museum». In their mission statements, they still make the claim to serve as cultural labs or urban centers of culture, culture meaning a local outpost of advanced economy that, in this case also means global conformism with the art market. But museums are by definition local, and they ultimately live from the expectation of local audiences. This also involves a notion of art that, presently, does not divide one society from another, but instead, separates the economic elite from the majority in *any* given culture.

It may be useful to situate museum foundations in opposition to new art fairs and biennials, which, after having initially turned up in places such as Istanbul, have meanwhile reached Shanghai. The difference is that such events are ephemeral and reflect a marketing strategy whereby local artists are granted only the privilege of being shown within the context of accepted international art. Thus, the responsible curators, mostly foreigners, guarantee or pretend to guarantee a high level of acceptance and attention for local artists. The Johannesburg Biennial opened in 1995, one year after the first democratic elections. It surely served high political goals. But such events, more often than not, foster participation in what is identified as the «contemporary art world». The latter, however, always needs new sensations and soon loses interest in a local art scene, as was sadly the case in Sarajevo.

Museums, by definition, are local institutions that cannot keep pace with such fashionable exhibitions. Though they may even serve as hosts for them, their key problem is the collection, which calls for a difficult choice, even if we exclude the intervention of private collectors: Either a museum collection is local and thus cannot capture the interest of the visitors and sponsors, or it represents an international level that is economically inaccessible and puts off local artists. Finally, such public institutions ultimately rely on a local audience that does not share the taste of the art world. Its strategies of representation link it to local culture.

The question is whether, and to what extent, *contemporary art* can represent *local culture*, even with critical aims, or whether art is simply explaining its own existence. We can also turn the question around. What does a local audience, which in many parts of the world

remains unfamiliar with art, expect to see in an art museum? To quote Colin Richards, we may ask ourselves: «What remains distinctive and beguiling about art?» He maintains that it is art's «relation to wider social and political dynamics» and reminds us that in South Africa, as soon as the art movement had gained momentum, there began «an ongoing debate about the *autonomy* of art vis à vis the social and political worlds in which it is embedded, and further, how the relationship between art and these worlds is best understood»<sup>20</sup>. On the one hand, art may be said to be «one of the few spaces left for imagining a less managed and administered life». On the other hand, art's claims for protection and autonomy easily become an obstacle to its public presence, and thus museums face a challenge that directly affects their traditional role.

As long as the outcome of globalization is still a largely clouded mirror, the art museum's future remains unpredictable, both with respect to its survival and its possible change of profile. Yet we can guess that the museum is predestined for the representation of «contemporary worlds» to take up Marc Augé's formulation. Augé spoke of «an anthropology for contemporary worlds» in order to devise a structural change for traditional anthropology. «The world's inhabitants have at last become truly contemporaneous, and yet the world's diversity is recomposed every moment: this is the paradox of our day. We must speak, therefore, of worlds in the plural». Anthropology's situation «has to do with the coexistence of the singular entity implied by the word contemporaneous and the multiplicity of worlds it qualifies». He goes so far as to say that «every society is made up of several worlds»<sup>21</sup>.

Applied to the case of museums, it is obvious that «the art world» may become more heterogeneous and increasingly less defined. This does not mean only that it has multiplicity within itself. Rather, we must accept that it changes from one place to another. This is valid even for collections whose art works change meaning wherever they are shown: They do not simply *own* one possible meaning or, alternatively, a universal significance, but are subjected to the comprehension of a local audience. Thus, the art world may eventually become a permeable, porous entity that disintegrates within a larger whole or yields to a diversity of systems. Its traditional opposition between «art» and «ethnic production» is thus exposed to new practices where such a dualism loses meaning. Even in the West, the museum age is not considerably older than what we call modern art and is thus not independent from clearly circumscribed historical and social conditions.

## 7. World art and global art

The new geography of art institutions affects not only the domain of contemporary art but also exerts pressure on major museums in the West when faced with the controversy over world art that brings with it possible repatriation claims. In December 2002, eighteen

20. Colin Richards, «The wounds of discovery», in A.Pinto Ribeiro, ed, *The state of the world* (Lisbon: Gulbenkian Foundation, 2006), p. 18f.

21. Marc Augé, *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds* (Stanford 1999), p. 89ff. cfr. Francis Affergan, *La pluralité des mondes. Vers une autre anthropologie* (Paris 1997).

metropolitan museums of the West signed a «Declaration on the importance and value of Universal Museums», thereby reusing the modern Western conception of universalism but applying it to the responsible care of a world art heritage. The declaration makes the claim to serve the globe and not just the West. Neil MacGregor, in the name of the British Museum, spoke of «a museum of the world for the world». He asked rhetorically: «Where else other than in these museums can the world see so clearly that it is one?» Mark O'Neill, director of the Glasgow Museums, however objected that museums with a world art collection, in order to act on behalf of the world, «must be open about the conflicted histories of some objects» and «reveal the Imperial as well as the Enlightenment history of collections»<sup>22</sup>.

While this activity centers on world art heritage, other mega institutions, mostly museums for modern art, such as the Guggenheim Museum in New York or the Centre Pompidou in Paris, react differently to the challenge of a globalized world by expanding their spheres of influence and by establishing neo-colonial branches of modernist art in other parts of the world. The global rhetoric hardly conceals the material and economic aspects underlying such plans. Recently, it has been reported that Hong Kong has been chosen as a location for a giant art center that will surpass anything in the West while continuing Western strategies. It seems that a clash of institutions and concepts represents a new global museum economy. Nearby, the so-called National Museum for Western Art in Tokyo was originally founded for identifying the West as a local culture and for distinguishing Western heritage and Western influence from the native patrimony. In continental China, the recently opened Beijing World Art Museum counters the Hong Kong plans by adopting Western claims for Chinese standards. The museum significantly mirrors and adapts the spirit of a newly emerging discipline of art criticism called «world art history» in China that claims to own competence to discuss «world art» from a Chinese point of view.

The concept of *world art* thus deserves a closer look since it differs from *global art* in both meaning and intention. The difference may seem like word play but it enables us to distinguish global art production, as a recent experience, from an old idea signifying world art as the climax of «world art heritage». World art as a concept already shaped André Malraux's «Museum without walls» that represented the heritage variant. Malraux's dreams took shape during the dark years of World War II in occupied Paris. The famous book *Le musée imaginaire*, first published in 1947, introduces world art as the sum of what was visually created in different cultures and which he identifies as «art» beyond the Western art discourse<sup>23</sup>. His approach is entirely visual and aesthetic without allowing any boundaries of cultural and historical difference. He claimed to overcome the traditional dualism between (Western) art and (ethnic) artifacts, which he considered an outdated colonial attitude. Ironically, his project also expresses an early guilt complex. The young Malraux was sentenced by the French Indochina administration for a colonial crime in

22. Moira Simpson, «A world of Museums: New Concepts, New Models», in Pinto Ribeiro (see note 20), p. 101f.

23. My description in Belting, *Art History after Modernism* (Chicago 2003)p. 153ff.

1924. He was charged with the theft of old temple sculptures that he intended to sell on the international art market<sup>24</sup>.

Malraux, paradoxically, still worshiped the museum, even if he dreamed of an ideal and universal museum. Meanwhile, the Museum, as an idea (whether with or without walls), has become a problem for so-called global art, which is still a recent phenomenon. Non-Western artists entertain a double bias against art heritage, both against their own ethnic traditions, and against art history in the Western sense of modernism. In their *post-ethnic* and *post-historical* attitude, they question two main functions of the Western museum. In the West, in the meantime, museums appear divided by two contradictory roles that cannot be easily reconciled. Traditionally, museums served as a collection of past art that underwent canonization inside the doors of the museum: to mention only the old French law that modern artists were not admitted to the Louvre until ten years after their death. In late modernism, however, museums have unexpectedly turned into an ephemeral stage for living art, which is often created for, and even commissioned by museums. I only remind you of so-called site-specific works and installation art. It is obvious that these two views of exhibition galleries contradict the institution's identity, although both are accepted as a legitimate use of the museum.

This leads us to the question of the *institutionalization* of so-called global art. It is, in this respect, necessary to make a distinction. In my opinion, the question concerns the role of the local art museum, especially outside the West, and its survival. In 2005, the senior curator of the Taipeh Museum of Contemporary Art, Kao Chien-hui, addressed such issues when she launched an exhibition whose topic was the institution as such. She named her show *Trading Place*, a «commentary exhibition» staged as a «conceptual and yet visual art exhibition but more so a discourse on issues that concern the art world today»<sup>25</sup>. The museum did not speak with its own voice, but instead, invited artists to deal with topics such as «stealing, exchanging, trading, re-presenting, and misappropriating». The artist Zhang Hongtu mounted a «replica exhibition arena» where the genuine work was questioned as a universal notion. One piece with the title *MoMAo Museum (Museum of my Art only)* ridiculed the museum for being a stage for self-promotion rather than a representative of the art world as such. The show certainly revealed a desire to involve the local audience in collection and display policies. Thus, the audience was encouraged to look at the museum and also at the contemporary art world via the mediation of the artists' views on these subjects and thus to develop their own attitude.

---

24. André Malraux, *Anti-Memoirs* (New York 1968)

25. [www.mocataiei.org.tw/english](http://www.mocataiei.org.tw/english)

## 8. Epilogue

For three years, the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris organized a seminar that offered monthly interventions on exhibition models of contemporary art<sup>26</sup>. Focus was not on the *museum collection*, but on the *exhibition space* with its manifold games and forms of entertainment. The French speakers further limited the discussion by reducing it to contemporary art as a *Western* topic, as if the *globalization* of art production, as the most conspicuous manifestation of contemporary art, had not yet happened. The artist Alejandra Riera delivered a paper entitled «An unresolved problem». But what is the problem? I consider the institutionalization of contemporary art, on a global scale, as the «unresolved problem». It may turn out that art museums must find several solutions, and not just one, as their future depends on a local significance even in the global era.

The problem rests with the expectations of their audience. But what is their audience? On the one hand, museums need to attract global tourism, which means claiming their share in a new geography of world cultures. In this respect, global art conformism would be no solution. On the other hand, they need acceptance and support by a local audience. Culture, to begin with, is specific in a local sense, even if minorities demand their own visibility in art institutions. In the one case, the problem is an economic one, in the other it proves to be political in the sense of freedom of expression.

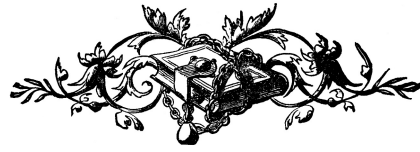
In the end, it does not resolve the issue to simply consider art museums as no more than economic projects and thus link them to the visions of an expanded world economy. Instead, their problem is rooted in the recognition of «art», since this concept—in a double sense—feeds and undermines contemporary art production. Art was a Western idea that emerged in modernity against national resistance, and promoted the contested claim of an international modernism. Since universalism, in this sense, did not survive in the common sense, we may ask whether in the end art will become a local idea. Such a question reveals the complexity inherent in the museum topic. «Local art» cannot mean arbitrary definitions that change from one place to another. The local must and will acquire a new meaning in the face of a global world.

Museums play a critical role, especially in the realm of contemporary art, a role different than that of representing world heritage. It is presently not possible to predict what this role will be. In a positive case, it would lead to the orchestration of roles that are different but still compatible. Such roles are closely linked to the contested claim of personal creativity, including freedom of expression, which was guaranteed as an accepted ideal of aesthetic competence in the sense of a distinct quality of «art». At the same time, such a concept of art was the condition for creating an off territory that we call museum, a zone protected from the grip of political power. In the latter case, such a zone remains a hope in those parts of the world where political freedom appears to be in danger. To conclude, art museums have

---

26. *L'Art Contemporain et son exposition* (1) (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002) with the text by A.Riera on p.139ff.

to integrate the double role of remaining (or becoming) an independent institution and, at the same time, serving as a new political forum.



# DISPUTATIO

Philosophical Research Bulletin  
Boletín de Investigación Filosófica

INFORMACION EDITORIAL DEL TRABAJO

---


## INFORMACIÓN DEL AUTOR | AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

*Nombre y Apellidos:* Hans Belting  
*Cargo o Puesto:* Professor and Advisor  
*Afiliación y Dirección:* Global Art and the Museum  
*Institucional:* ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe  
Lorenzstr. 19  
76135 Karlsruhe Germany  
*Grado Académico :* Doctor en Historia del Arte [≈Ph.D.]  
*Afiliación Institucional:* Universität Mainz  
*Email:* gam@zkm.de

## INFORMACIÓN DEL TRABAJO | WORK DETAILS

*Nombre del Trabajo:* Contemporary art and the museum in the global age  
*Nombre de la Revista:* Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin  
*ISSN:* 2254-0601  
*Numeración de la Revista:* Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 16-30  
*Fecha de Publicación:* Diciembre de 2012  
*Periodicidad:* Semestral  
*Lugar de Publicación:* Salamanca - Madrid  
*e-mail:* boletin@disputatio.eu  
*web site:* www.disputatio.eu

## NOTA EDITORIAL | EDITORIAL NOTE

*Tipo de trabajo:* Artículo. Original  
*Reeditado de:* Ninguno  
*Licencia:*  3.0 Unported.  
Con permiso del autor  
*Separata:* No  
*ISBN:* No

© El autor(es) 2012. Publicado por *Disputatio* bajo una licencia *Creative Commons*, por tanto Vd. puede copiar, distribuir y comunicar públicamente este artículo. No obstante, debe tener en cuenta lo prescrito en la nota de copyright. Permisos, preguntas, sugerencias y comentarios, dirigirse a este correo electrónico: boletin@disputatio.eu