

# On the (Im)possibility of a Global Art

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the possibility of building a paradigm of global art. It is obvious that art today is deeply shaped by its position in a contemporaneity marked by globalization; consequently, it is more and more frequently discussed about the globalization of art as a decisive phenomenon for the present and mainly the future of art. It is equally clear that the world of art has been making efforts to really connect to the changes that marked the contemporary world especially after 1989. All these efforts, both theoretical and practical (we take into account exhibitions and biennales of the monumental Documenta 11 kind), accounted, however, for a series of failures and succeeded, in our opinion, only in placing itself in the extension of that fascination towards the exotic and primitive that is a constant of European modernity. We propose to show that this failure is due mainly to the fact that it is too easily forgotten that the category of fine arts is a modern invention resulted from key social transformations in Europe during the long eighteenth century. We will argue that it is premature to speak about a global art while art continues to represent a word of the language of the modern western culture, a word which cannot be translated in many of the languages of other cultures.

**Keywords:** contemporary art, globalization, global art, *Magiciens de la Terre*, *Documenta 11*

In 1907 Picasso painted *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, a true icon of modern art, considered by some art historians to be the 'first' 20<sup>th</sup> century painting. Exactly a century later, in 2007, Dubai hosted the first Global Art Forum where, according to one of the participants, art historian Hans Belting, terms like contemporary art and global art were used synonymously. The century between the two events was extremely troubled; throughout this period, not only art history as discipline but art category itself became more and more questioned.

Speaking about Picasso's painting, William R. Everdell (241) could say without exaggerating that: "Everything in art would go into it; and (such was the hope of the most ambitious painter in Paris) all subsequent art would grow out of." Picasso would admit only late in 1937, in an interview to André Malraux, that he had studied African art before painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*. Here are his words: "When I went to the Trocadero it was disgusting. The flea market. The smell. I was all alone. I wanted to get away. But I didn't leave. I stayed. I stayed. I understood something very important: something was happening to me, wasn't it? The masks weren't like other kind of sculptures. Not at all. They were magical." (Flam 33) But how can one explain the fact that forms belonging to such a distant culture had such an enormous influence on Picasso? We must underline that, maybe more than anything else, the presence of these strange objects confer to Picasso's painting what we might call its 'modernity'. The importance of African art in shaping modern art cannot be neglected; however, it is still an open subject. The African masks and statues clearly fascinated Picasso's contemporaries. Yet what was the nature of this fascination? Aesthetical or ethnographical?

The ethnographic museum visited by Picasso in 1907 was founded in 1878 to host a variety of objects coming from extra European cultures, so-called "primitive" at that time. In

the same year, 1878, they were exhibited at the Universal Exhibition in Paris. These “primitive” cultures were thought to illustrate primitive man’s way of life and therefore the aim of such exhibitions was to present the progress of humanity from savagery to civilization. They would also illustrate the power of capitalism and its ability to assimilate other cultures. In the beginning, the exhibited objects were not seen as art but as tools and ritual objects. What transformed them into art was, to a great extent, the attention they had received from artists, starting with the 1900s. They saw these objects as the direct expression of the subjectivity of those who created them. They were “primitive” not only because they were roughly made – although artists added value to this aspect so as to contrast conventional refinement – but also because they were original as early, fundamental forms. The best proof of this passage from the ethnographic toward the aesthetic is represented by the fact that a series of objects hosted initially by ethnographic museums migrated to collections of art museums in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The fascination with the exotic and primitive represents a constant of European modernity. We can find it in a series of dichotomies – civilized versus savage, agent of history versus passive recipient of history, progress versus regress, stagnation or decadence, etc. – specific to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet so familiar even today. All these do nothing but remind Europeans how superior they are compared to *the others*. One more dichotomy could be added to those listed above: beautiful versus ugly. The ideal of beauty, which reminded of the privileged relation with Greek and Roman culture, a relation that would obsess modern Europe beginning with Winckelmann, would find its counterpoint in the “ugliness” of the savage. Finally, let’s remember that the classical definition of art, beginning with the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was something like this: “art is that kind of human production which seeks the beautiful and accomplishes it,” and “beautiful is harmony and proportion” (Tatarkiewicz 72-73). We should remember that anthropology, as a science of man, is a Western invention, created to investigate non-European societies which were seen as “primitive” rather than “civilized”, and on the other hand ethnography as “a field of study” of anthropology, develops mostly in areas colonized by the Western powers. In 1910, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl published a book entitled suggestively *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*; he draws a conclusion that seemed so natural: primitive mentality was clearly different from the races which had produced the Mediterranean civilizations that gave birth to ‘rationalist philosophy’ and ‘positivist science’.

All these do nothing but confirm an obvious reality: European culture had not been able to manage the dialogue with *the other*. Was this an existential inability of the European man? Foreseeing the issues raised by globalization three decades earlier, Paul Ricoeur analyses the emergence of a ‘universal civilization’ and asks himself about its connection to the decline of ‘national cultures’. The French philosopher is fully aware of the importance of this moment in our recent history, as well as of the fact that humanity is in danger from the moment it joins what he calls a “unique planetary civilization”:

... the discovery of the plurality of cultures is never a harmless experience ... When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with destruction by our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just *others*, that we ourselves are an “other” among others. All meaning and every goal having disappeared, it becomes possible to wander through civilizations as if through vestiges and ruins. The whole of mankind becomes a kind of imaginary museum ... We have

to admit that this danger is at least equal and perhaps more likely than that of atomic destruction. (Ricoeur 278)

The various analyses on contemporary culture in the last two decades seem to prove that Ricoeur was right. These analyses gravitate around the term 'globalization' which starts being used in the scholarly literature at the end of the 1980s. The term is difficult to define. A temporary definition of globalization, understood in its wide sense, refers to a series of effects resulting from the fact that the world becomes more interconnected as a result of increasing world trade, population movement and cultural exchange. Cultures, people and places do not seem distant and distinctive any longer, but more close and superposed due to the movement of people and their cultural habitats. *Grosso modo*, the debate around globalization oscillates between two extremes. At one pole, it is the idea that we entered a new phase of history, characterized by the nation states taking a back seat and the emergence of a truly multinational capitalism. At the other pole, there is the idea that nothing new has happened and the nation state remains the foundation stone in organizing the world. Beyond these positions and many other intermediate which are only stereotypes, it is obvious that the contemporary situation is characterized by a shading of borders between the spheres, apparently distinctive once, of economy and culture.

Globalization produced the conditions that let us rethink culture in a broader historical frame. The discussions around globalization and culture focused on the way the physical and immaterial speed – the movement of commodities, people, money and electronic signals – reconfigured the space of culture. Culture has always been intimately connected with geography; it has existed in determined, fixed spaces like those of a nation, region, group or subculture. In the age of globalization, cultural borders are imagined as indefinite and undetermined: 'the local' intersects the global so that cultures become hybrid, mixed and impure. Globalization is the age of mass migration, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. If, for example, Fredric Jameson (1935-1991) describes globalization as "the moment the economic and the cultural merge to become empirically and heuristically inseparable," Samuel Huntington speaks about "the clash of civilizations" which also sustains the centrality of culture in analyzing the new global situation. Huntington argues that, in the post Cold War world, following the dislocations produced by modernization, urbanization and mass communication, the fundamental source of international conflict will be less ideological or economic, but cultural. In conclusion, culture is regarded today as the key through which globalization is both experimented and understood. The latter seems to be the main feature of human society at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to the obvious fact that it interferes one way or another with our lives. People move, willingly or not, in a number that keeps increasing, taking with them stories, juxtaposed languages and cultures, living together and changing local spaces.

What does this seemingly endless debate have to do with contemporary art? How is globalization relevant to art? Before trying to answer this question we should remember the fact that art becomes an extremely problematic category in modernity, a word that stands, beginning with the 18<sup>th</sup> century, on hierarchies and narratives extremely questioned in the past decades. It determined Adorno to note as early as the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century that: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist." (Adorno 1) Considering that what we commonly name "modern art" is the reference term of contemporary discourse on art, let us start from Hans Belting's observation that the definition of modern art is based on a "double

exclusion.” (Belting 54) First, making art means making modern art. Artists unable to assume this axiom are automatically excluded from the category of art. The second exclusion refers to the ethnic artifacts. Their creators are imagined as living within a time outside history.

As far as the first exclusion is concerned, it is important to remember that ‘art’ itself, as a social institution and distinctive category of thought, only appears with modern society. Art is therefore a product of or, more exactly, an aspect of modernity. It is only after the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century that the category of ‘art’ – precisely ‘fine art’ – stabilizes itself as a name for the objects and performances valued mainly not for their contribution to the greatness or dignity of a person, regime, context or ceremony, but in themselves. The art objects would be gradually detached from their original context, collected and exhibited in museums; they would also acquire a genealogy as members of a distinctive class of objects. From this moment on, people begin to make objects for these collections – art objects. The idea of the autonomy of art is certainly one of the most important axioms of modern aesthetics, if not its central principle. This idea became the brand of a new type of aesthetic experience, different from practical, moral, cognitive and religious ways. The essence of the doctrine, expressed in common terms, consists in the idea that art has no religious, moral, cognitive social or any other kind of extra-aesthetic purposes. The only reason of existence for art is to be beautiful, well-structured, well-written. Art “teaches” us nothing about life. Art makes progress exclusively on its own basis; it neither affects nor reflects the social, historical or biographical circumstances of its creation. Art is therefore something (a mixture of images, colours, words; a system of signs, pure fiction, etc.), and the real world is something different. Thus art, understood as autonomous activity (self-sufficient) based on aesthetics, is an absolutely western product no older than the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The aesthetic tradition of other cultures, similar to the European one prior to this century, represented a different type of production, determined by religious, representational, commemorative functions, etc. Let us not forget that today, the art of these cultures is not the result of the evolution of traditional aesthetics. This is a reality pointed out, among others, by Mircea Eliade who remarked that “in the Far East the *artistic emotion* still preserves a religious dimension even among the scholars.” (Eliade 49)

This meaning given to art started to be increasingly disputed during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the point of being almost replaced in the last decades. Although art has always been a social and political activity, it is however evident that only in the past few decades has art undergone a change which perceives in new terms the relation between the artistic creation and the social, political, cognitive field. The most important representatives of contemporary art – from Joseph Beuys and the Fluxus movement to Rauschenberg or Jeff Koons – assure us that art is deeply social and political. This open-mindedness of contemporary art, with all the risks involved, was inevitable during the 1960s, becoming perhaps the only chance to come out from this cul-de-sac of excessive conceptualization and formalization where modern art had got into. Becoming social art, the work of art tends to become again a historical document, abolishing the former modernist conflict between ‘art’ and ‘life’. If the avant-garde confronted an early cultural industry, postmodernism was facing a media culture that was much more technologically and economically developed, a ‘cultural logic of capitalism’ (Fredric Jameson) which penetrates every aspect of humanity. If for the modernists it was crucial to save the purity of art from urbanization, massification, technological development, mass culture in one word, the postmodern artist, who lives in a world of omnipresent cultural industry, has no choice but to strive to free himself from the ‘pure art’ ghetto in order to get into cultural industry. It is exactly the same thing that

happens to artistic movements like Pop art, Op, Fluxus, Concept or Minimalism, which make the art scene of the 1960s-1970s so lively, interesting and commercially profitable at the same time. Trying to put an end to the deadlock where the avant-gardes pushed it, art aims to go beyond the aesthetic, to reach 'real life', engaging in a 'dirtier' but more important fight than the purely aesthetic one. Thus, a large part of contemporary artistic research does not limit itself any longer to investigate the material aspects of art or how to explore the creative process. Its goal is to penetrate the interdisciplinary context. The strategies of experimental and interpretative research are meant to connect art to a present state of fact. Most of visual contemporary art is critically engaged in confronting other fields of life such as globalization, identity, environment, etc. Art tries to prove that it can bring an important contribution to knowing and understanding these essential dimensions of the present.

A decisive moment for the destiny of contemporary art is represented by the events that have marked the political scene beginning with 1989. This is what Julien Stallbrass underlines in this respect: "The global events of 1989 and after – the reunification of Germany, the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, the rise of global trade agreements, the consolidation of trading blocs, and the transformation of China into a partially capitalist economy – changed the character of the art world profoundly." (Stallbrass 7) The absolute domination of former centres in the West and the U.S.A. is increasingly questioned by artists who belonged not so far ago to the periphery of the art world. These artists (from Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, Africa, the Pacific, the Middle East) are more and more seen in great exhibitions, so that a new international art seems to emerge.

The discussions around the relation between art and globalization must hence take into account, on the one hand, the growth in prosperity of an increasingly larger number of centres that are not traditionally connected to the western art world (China is the best example, but not the only one), and on the other hand, the evident movement of the young artists from peripheries towards Western centres. Starting with the 1980s and especially after 1989, the international art scene was invaded by a real flow of artists coming from countries whose historical and national context was not very familiar to the West. The emergence and later the assertion of these artists in international exhibitions and biennales inevitably created new problems of comprehension and interpretation. The historical and social contexts rendered by their works were not automatically accessible to a public that had not been acquainted with such cultures. The newly founded biennales like those from Havana (1984), Hwangju, South Korea (1995), Shanghai (1996), Yokohoma (2001) prove that "the linear, singular, white, and masculine principle of modernism have finally fallen, to be replaced by a multiple, diverse, rainbow-hued, fractally complex proliferation of practices and discourses." (Stallbrass 7) It is obvious today, even for a non-specialist, that art is practiced inside some national and global webs which transcend both national borders and the simple local/global dichotomies. The interest for *the other* has certainly opened new spaces for art. This change was clearly prepared by postmodern critique. In a postmodern construction of the intercultural texts, truth cannot be considered any more in a dogmatic, self-sufficient manner. The West thus loses its status of unique possessor of truth, and humanity cannot be divided in two different zones: superior/civilized and inferior/primitive.

The difficulties art is confronted with when trying to assume the challenges of globalization are best evidenced when we want to analyze the successes and especially the failures of two of the most important artistic events of the last two decades: the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* at Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris and the 2002 Documenta 11 at Kassel.

Since 1989 the problems of multiculturalism and postcolonialism in art have become a usual presence in exhibitions. Most of these events were concerned with the problem of exclusion and difference inside democratic societies. The novelty of *Magiciens de la Terre* was that it had excluded the problem of difference by placing it, both spatially and temporally, outside these societies, in other words, outside the western space. Jean-Hubert Martin, the exhibition curator, proposed to cancel both spatial distance, by bringing *the other* from the periphery to the centre, and the temporal one, relying on his current creativity. The exhibition was built in two sections. The first section included works of artists who belonged to the art 'centre': a representative selection of contemporary art works created in the past twenty years, as well as works of artists who are connected to non-European cultures. This connection denoted two aspects: either the works belonged to African or Asian artists who had been living in the West and were connected to elements of their culture, or the works belonged to western artists and showed interest in other cultures than those they belonged to. The second section included works of artists who belonged to the 'periphery': archaic works meant for ceremonies and rites, related to magic and religious rituals, etc. As J.-H. Martin noticed, in a language that reminds us of Picasso, the exhibited objects "have in common that they have an aura. These are not mere objects or tools for practical and material use. They are intended to act on the mind and on the ideas of which they are products. They are containers of metaphysical values. They communicate a sense." (Martin 8) The importance of this exhibition was underlined (perhaps more than it deserved) by Nicolas Baurriaud who considered that it signaled "the official entry of art into a globalized world shorn of master narratives, a world that is henceforth our own." (Baurriaud 11) Deserving the credit for being, as its subtitle announced, the *World's First Contemporary Art Exhibition, Magiciens de la Terre* was, however, severely criticized for confronting the avant-garde of European art with products of totally different cultural circumstances, in order to transplant them within the context of 'high' art, a context completely unfamiliar to them. The decontextualization of the works by transplanting them in a different paradigm resulted in losing their original significance, and *the other* continued to be perceived in terms of the exotic and primitivism. Beyond these, *Les Magiciens de la Terre* represented a very important exhibition due to its impressive physical dimension (more than a hundred artists from all over the world), its global ambitions, the claim of voicing so many different cultures and its presumed intention to question the cultural differences that had divided the world before.

In reaction to the *Magiciens de la Terre*, the 2002 Documenta 11 in Kassel opened a massive exhibition dedicated to exploring globalization in relation to the multiple visual art practices. Documenta 11 was the first international exhibition with a 'non-Western' curator, Okwui Enwezor, and focused almost exclusively on debating aspects that can be brought together under the 'globalization' label. Enwezor argued that, in a global world, people, cultures and places are not distant and distinct one from another, but more and more interconnected through the movement of people and cultural habitats. Thus, the main feature of globalization would be, according to Enwezor (321), "closeness." The purpose of the exhibition, clearly articulated by Enwezor, was to shape the rapid changes and transformations that determine new, inventive ways of transdisciplinary actions within the world contemporary public sphere. In such a world, non-Western cultural, political and social histories become more difficult to ignore. The Kassel exhibition had been conceived as the fifth part of a series of 'platforms' which took place in several locations in the world beginning with March 15, 2001. The first four platforms consisted in public debates,

workshops, film and video programmes and took place in Vienna, Berlin, New Delphi, Santa Lucia and Lagos. The locations had been chosen to illustrate particular aspects of globalization – for example the notion of “creolity” was explored at Santa Lucia. This itinerary drew an axis of intercultural references where Germany and Austria represented “the West”/“the centre” and West Indies, India and Nigeria represented “the rest”/“the periphery”. Enwezor’s conviction was that exploring globalization from a single point of view/location was inevitably reductive, especially if it was achieved in a traditional centre of modern art. Investigating globalization must admit this danger of reduction to a unique perspective and must admit multiple points of view. This must be understood also as an attempt to articulate the importance of local specificity. The decision to open exhibitions in the whole world through the five platforms can be seen as an awareness of the fact that an adequate approach of globalization needs the awareness of interrelating art with broader social, economical and political aspects. If the *Magiciens de la Terre*, despite its goals, succeeded only in enlarging the gap between centre and periphery due to excessive exoticism, Documenta 11 counted with more determination on an ‘anthropology of proximity’, thus succeeding in emphasizing the voice of ‘multitude’.

Although it emphasized that no evaluation of contemporary global culture can ignore the great parts of non-European art included in the exhibition, Documenta 11 did not propose to build a narrative of contemporary art based on identity politics. Rather, it tried to build a new and comprising speech on art in the globalization age. The activity of the four platforms offered the opportunity to give birth to a truly international discourse at the junction between art and the public sphere in contemporary culture. Enwezor discredited previous attempts of forging a unique and universal conception of artistic and cultural modernity. This ambition would do nothing but resume the modernist exclusivist discourses. On the contrary, Documenta 11 intended to reflect upon the global cultural changes. The ultimate goal of the exhibition was to try to find what the non-western avant-garde meant for the western world. Thus the avant-garde revives exactly by means of this search of meaning within the dystopic reality of contemporary existence. That is why, despite the radical attempt of rethinking the discourse in contemporary art, “Documenta 11 did not succeed in disrupting the West’s drive for global hegemony. Its interrogation of the possibility of avant-garde action was criticized as a very conservative and institutional interpretation of contemporary culture, one that emphasized precisely the occidental paradigms that Documenta 11 targeted in its counternarrative.” (Ogbechie 86). Despite the fact that the exhibited works represented a global perspective on contemporary art and visual culture, the dominant structural overview continued to belong to the western world. The panoptic scopic regime was fully operational inside the meticulous succession of chaotic events; it suggests a typically western tendency of objectivating and determining reality. On the other hand, if Documenta 11 can be understood in terms of a complex intercultural research, the results, either visual or textual, were far from being surprising. They only reminded us about something we had already known: there is a global condition of exploitation where all social institutions – from ‘democracy’ to ‘art’- are involved. This condition is far from being decentred. Indeed, geography continues to be a key factor of the global condition of exploitation, as it was perceived by Documenta 11. It is true that the domination of the traditional artistic centres has been reduced because of globalization. For the first time it has become possible for an artist to bring significative contributions to the course of the art world without being part of a specific centre. Despite all these, the main

artistic currents continue to pass through the central places of world art: New York, London, Vienna, Berlin, etc., all centres of the western world.

The world of art continues therefore to own a centre and a periphery. It is true that we do not believe any more in the myth of universal value in art and artistic hierarchy based on 'universality'. However, our belief is that things have not essentially changed in the last century; at the best, we are at the beginning of a shift whose results have been modest so far. Globalization seems to be a long process. On the other hand, it is evident that art is today shaped most deeply by its situation in a contemporaneity which bears the marks of globalization. We have become aware of the fact that the division of the artistic world into several worlds was doomed to failure; art *becomes* contemporary insofar as it succeeds in voicing our values, sensibilities and interests, and the artist manages "to create a place from which it is possible to speak and to be heard without compromising one's life experience whatever its source(s)." (Fisher 235)

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