

## Global Turn

# Global, Postcolonial, or Transcultural? Perspectives for a Critical Art History

Prof. Dr. Monica Juneja  
Heidelberg Centre for  
Transcultural Studies  
Universität Heidelberg  
[juneja@hcts.uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:juneja@hcts.uni-heidelberg.de)

# Global, Postcolonial, or Transcultural? Perspectives for a Critical Art History

Monica Juneja

Though art history is considered to have been a late-comer in the project to 'globalize' its subjects and frameworks, it is an established fact that today the discipline plays a constitutive role in the humanities and social sciences as they respond to the challenges of the so-called global turn. The subjects investigated by art historians – artists, objects, pictorial/artisanal practices and canons on the one hand, museal displays and exhibitions, curators, patrons, and collectors on the other – have all had mobile histories across the centuries. However, the disciplinary frameworks and institutional settings within which art history has been located have been those constituted according to fixed and stable units such as the nation state or civilizational entities that date to the nineteenth century, but which live on in the work of theorists such as Samuel Huntington, for whom civilizations comprise fixed geo-ethnic blocs. This paradox characterizes art history across continents: today the discipline can scarcely be viewed as purely 'Western' in that it no longer retains an exclusively 'originary' attachment to its parochial beginnings in Europe.

During its global journeys to other regions of the world, it has acquired new roots and undergone adaptations and reconfigurations responding to local and regional contingencies. Many of the young post-colonial nations of Asia and Africa, joined more recently by the younger post-cold war nations of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, all seek to define national identity through notions of unique civilizational achievement. Disciplines here have come to be closely tied to identity formations around the nation: this has meant that the nation is the unit of analysis; a narrative of its unique achievements, past and present, explained purely from within, is transmitted through its institu-

tions – the university, the museum, and the heritage industry. Negotiating the tension between national identity and such relationships that break out of national frames and inform memories and visions of so much artistic production has been the central task confronting an art history aspiring to be 'global'. Yet no single trajectory of development organizes the eclectic methods and understandings that have taken shelter under the expansive umbrella of the global turn. The ideas presented here have been developed fully and elaborated empirically in my recent monograph (Juneja 2023).

## Defining the Global

One of the challenges of defining the global is the extreme slipperiness of the term itself, an attribute that derives in part from its etymological and iconic roots. Drawing its valence from the globe – at once an abstract form and an iconic object – the adjective 'global' frequently evokes a reassuring image of universal holism, a quality reaffirmed by circulating photographs of planet earth or 'blue planet' that attained the height of their popularity during the last decades of the previous century. The lack of cartographic specificity coupled with the absence of human presence characterizing images of a 'whole earth' made the global (and its cognate globalism) a fitting metaphor to represent phenomena such as transcontinental financial empires and communication networks that embodied a claim to untrammelled progress. Signifying an encompassing quality, the global therefore has come to be beset by the problem of any totalizing concept: the claim to an easy universalism that threatens to foreclose more nuanced explorations of the cultural field. Within art history, the epithet global has been used in multiple, often inconsistent, ways,

as for instance to characterize art history as a discipline to be practiced uniformly across the globe, one that would subsume 'local' art. Alternatively, it signals towards an inclusive discipline – also labelled world art history – that would encompass different world cultures and their canons, or one that searches for the lowest common denominator to hold together humans across time and space who have been making art for millennia 'because our biological nature has led us to do so' (Onians 2004, 11; a more extensive discussion of these positions, see Juneja 2011, 278–280). The term has been equated at times with conceptual imperialism, at others with multicultural eclecticism. A recent survey of the field undertaken by Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel in 2019 attempts to bring together innumerable strands under a single label, and in the process reveals the unwieldy, hold-all quality of the domain now designated as Global Art History. The problem is partly due to indiscriminate selection by the author who pays little attention to frameworks of enquiry.

During the years following the dramatic events of 1989, globality in art was increasingly conflated with the formation of a domain of contemporary art as a system incarnating the cultural logic of globalization together with its values of internationalism and multiculturalism. The proliferation of biennials, art fairs, and mega-exhibitions, accompanied by an expanding art viewing public, artists' residencies, and itinerant curators in and beyond Euro-America, and not least a feverish art market, brought forth a characterization of the 'global contemporary' as a freely circulating, ahistorical, non-situated and economically exploitable mass (Belting 2009; see also the catalogue of the exhibition curated by Belting and Buddensieg at the ZKM Karlsruhe from September 2011 to February 2012, Belting/Buddensieg/Weibel 2013). Hans Belting's definition of 'global art' to characterize those contemporary artistic productions emanating from the non-Western world, which become publicly accessible through exhibitions and mega-shows, has continued to inform most discussions on what could define the contours of a global art history, namely a

focus on artworlds post 1989. And yet the popularity of this definition overlooks not only its presentism, but also its Eurocentric premises: for art from 'elsewhere' to be recognized as global it must depend on the exclusive agency of Western curators, exhibition sites, and publics, who accord (or deny) it this status. The dependence, in turn, becomes a drive towards producing a kind of art that might then be considered global. Globality in this understanding, an attribute to be constituted within and transmitted by a work through an interlinked set of agencies, contributes to cementing a hierarchical division of the world between what Gerardo Mosquera aptly calls 'cultures that curate' and those which 'get curated' (Mosquera 1994, 133).

For more recent art histories, therefore, the challenge has been to formulate a paradigm of the global that does not collapse into hegemonic localisms, but remains plural and multi-sited. One of the key questions now being asked is: Must a global art history follow the logic of economic globalization, or does it call for an alternative conception of globality to be able to effectively theorize relationships of connectivity that encompass disparities as well as contradictions and negotiate multiple subjectivities of the actors involved? Further, what are the choices available to artistic producers to negotiate between complicity with or dependence on global capital and critical initiatives that foster transcultural modes of co-production and sustainability? How can art history enable us to view the historical present as a simultaneity of clashing and conjoining temporalities constituted by their pre-histories? The discussion of alternate temporalities as resources for resisting and subverting Western teleological time goes back to Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000). Bruno Latour refers to a temporality in which the contemporary is located "along a spiral rather than a line [...] the future takes the form of a circle expanding in all directions, and the past is not surpassed, but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled [...] Such a temporality does not oblige us to use the labels 'archaic' or 'advanced', since every

cohort of contemporary elements may bring together elements from all times". (Latour 1993, 75)

How does art history handle issues of commensurability or its absence among cultures? How can it translate intellectual resources and insights of regional experiences beyond Euro-America into globally intelligible analyses? Addressing these issues calls for a critical perspective that separates globality from the fact of globalization. While the latter constitutes a set of economic, political, and technological phenomena, the former can be described as a conceptual matrix governed by a logic not informed by a neoliberal globalism that then morphs into right-wing nationalism. Such a 'critical globality' spells a stringent, reflexive mode of interrogation, which has, among other things, moved beyond the macro-level analyses that had characterised approaches of the early phases of the global paradigm (on the notion of critical globality, coined by me, see Juneja 2018b).

Taking a cue from historians, art historical investigations too have begun to engage in a productive cross-fertilization with micro-historical perspectives, to develop methods with which to negotiate multiple scales (for discussion and references see Juneja 2023, 139–141).

In addition we witness a positional shift within investigations that now take as their starting point and primary focus regions that were once regarded a periphery of Euro-America, enabling the field to overcome the limitations of both a national framework as well as the provincialism of a single, sealed 'area'. At the same time, however, the prominent subjects of a global art history have remained rooted in the contemporary – biennials and nomadic curators, exhibition circuits, the art market, the digital revolution are among the themes with which a global art history continues to be largely identified, and which are fast acquiring the status of a new canon. There are however important exceptions to this trend (see Savoy 2017; Baader/Shalem/Wolf 2017; DaCosta Kaufmann/Dossin/Joyeux-Prunel 2015; Leibson/Peterson 2012). An exemplary collection, path-breaking for its time, is Farago 1995.

## Postcolonial Discourses

In its programmatic commitment to questioning entrenched hierarchies, globally framed art histories build on postcolonial discourses of power and identity that have sought to destabilize systems of cultural and political hegemony bequeathed by colonialism. The cross-disciplinary field of postcolonial studies covers a vast terrain and has a history of some four and a half decades. During this time, it has brought forth an abundance of writings, both empirical investigations as well as theoretical reflections, whose import can barely be summarized in the space available here. In the course of its expansion, the domain of postcoloniality has intersected with several analytical approaches and thematic areas, notably gender studies, the linguistic-cum-cultural turn, museum studies, Indigenous and Black studies. At the risk of being exceedingly reductive, I will sketch out some of the key tendencies that characterize this vast and highly diverse intellectual terrain, and which have had a bearing on art historical writing in the wake of the global turn.

Going back to the 1980s, the thrust of postcolonial studies has been towards identifying blind spots in Euro-American literary and historical approaches to colonialism, towards questioning the centrality of 'Europe' as 'the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories' (Chakrabarty 2000, 1). The move to question canonical knowledge systems can be traced to a foundational text of postcolonial studies, Edward W. Said's monograph, *Orientalism* (1978), which drew on Gramscian and Foucauldian analyses of knowledge production as being inextricably related to the exercise of imperial power. While referring to a cluster of scholarly and literary representations of North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia – all blandly labelled in the West as 'the Orient' – Said's theorization lent itself to widespread application across disciplines, to serve as a tool to deconstruct systems of discursive authority that were held to function as vehicles of colonial ideology and exploitation. Amongst its earliest and more direct applications in art history is Linda Nochlin's analysis of the production of colonial

stereotypes by French Salon paintings of the nineteenth century, a genre conventionally considered as untouched by political intent (Nochlin 1983).

Though the Saidian model of a colonial power-knowledge nexus was critiqued for its reduction of the colonized to the status of passive objects and its conception of knowledge production as a purely 'Western' enterprise, the paradigm has continued over several decades to inform, in more or less nuanced forms, investigations of discursive practices in colonial contexts, involving the study of archives, political and cultural institutions, the law, textual traditions. Said himself revised his position some years later in response to criticisms of one-sidedness (see Said 1993). More recent scholarship draws attention to the 'duress' of colonialism's historical practices beyond the attainment of independence by erstwhile colonies. According to this view, the 'post' in the postcolonial is not reducible to a temporal marker, in the light of continuing histories of violence and inequality built on 'imperial ruins' (Stoler 2016).

During the course of its expansion as a transdisciplinary paradigm, postcolonialism valorized both cultural difference as well as the porosity of cultures, which engagement with processes of colonization brought to the forefront of investigations. To analyse these phenomena scholarship generated a prolific vocabulary that served as tools to study border-crossings, mixed identities, as well as strategies on the part of the colonized to resist forms of colonial domination, which built on hierarchies of absolute difference. Terms such as hybridity, entanglement, métissage, creolization, fuzziness, in-between-ness are examples of concepts which were used to break open units of investigation structured around fixed entities. Amongst these hybridity, to take the most widely used example, originally a term from biology, was invested with the theoretical potential to uncover strategies adopted by the colonized to reverse hegemonic practices. In the writings of Homi Bhabha hybridity, together with its companion mimicry, serves to theorize such strategies that simulated resemblance to the colonizer's doctrines, but contained an

element of residual difference, which then had the power to expose and undermine the colonial order (Bhabha 1994). Many of these terms, conjoined with others such as flows, transfers, circulation, transfers, networks, have since been drawn into the vocabulary of global studies, to write about mobility and media connectivity. They have all become signature concepts of the global turn, most frequently deployed to undertake culturalist readings of economic and other phenomena. The terms are at once metaphors and methodological tools, a circumstance that has a bearing on their explanatory power. Most of them describe – rather than explain – macro-phenomena such as the movement of capital, or population, or commodities, ideas or events, by placing emphasis on mobility per se rather than enabling an analysis of processes. Moreover, they have undergone a dilution of their one-time potential owing to inflationary, often non-discriminating use. This is particularly true of hybridity, which was once viewed with reservations owing to its biologicistic associations with racial obsessions surrounding purity and miscegenation, and has today ended up, together with similar terms, all suggesting 'some kind of mix' (Burke 2009, 2), as a theoretical straightjacket into which a host of diverse experiences come to be accommodated.

Both postcolonial analyses and more recent theories of decoloniality have tended to frame their subjects of investigation along a colonizer-colonized divide, a binary perspective that does not allow us to view cultural phenomena as multi-sited interactions between units and places not all incarcerated within a single colonial relationship. In art history, studies of global modernism furnish one example of a movement that is multi-polar and non-linear, even as many modernist movements in Asia and Africa were driven by anti-colonial sentiments at a more general level (Kravagna 2017; Juneja 2023, chapter 3). Today's perspectives of decolonization stake a claim to a 'radical rethinking' of postcolonial positions, which, in the words of one of its advocates, continue to work with 'essentially Western instruments and assumptions' to 'inadvertently reproduce coloniality of knowledge' (see

for example Tlostanova 2020, 166–168). While an extensive critical engagement with decolonial perspectives is beyond the scope of this brief survey, it needs to be pointed out that the notion of decolonization and its various cognates are used in a wide range of contexts and in an eclectic manner, both as noun and verb: they could refer to a process of liberation from the colonial yoke, or designate an epochal condition and an epistemological frame, or serve as a shrill call to action, to dismantle existing power constellations in domains such as museums, pedagogies, curricula, memory cultures ... the list goes on. As a result, decolonial approaches mean different things, even as they all partake of a common polemical thrust. The founding texts of decolonial theory critique what they conceive of as an all-encompassing totalitarian idea of modernity; yet the project of liberation that seeks to delink coloniality from modernity replicates the same totalizing, binary structure between the so-called West – that is, Europe and the North Atlantic – and those it has excluded, by reducing a world of heterogeneous, unstable, transversal, and dynamic processes to a single, encompassing logic of coloniality (see Mignolo/Walsh 2018; Quijano 2000; Vázquez 2020).

A reductive conflation of modernity and coloniality comes across as a form of theoretical short-circuiting that ignores the long history of the former's migrations, mutations, re-enactments on sites across the globe, where subjects, not least the colonized, have redefined and re-enacted what it means to be modern. The totalizing opposition between 'Western' epistemologies and 'indigenous' languages ascribes a homogeneity or purity to each side, assuming that non-European epistemologies are innately egalitarian by virtue of being not from the West and by overlooking the hierarchies and modes of discrimination that structure the latter as well. In the absence of an outlook that engages with the future of disciplines, the solution proposed by theorists of decoloniality as an answer to the historical impact of global capitalism is a return to some earlier age of precolonial harmony and conviviality.

## Theory of Transculturation

To be able to think the global as a critical perspective rather than a spatial temporal quality, and to be able to get past the limitations of postcolonialism while carrying forward its critical thrust, we need to pose the question of culture in its concatenation with our disciplines and institutions. Viewed in this perspective, I understand a critical globality as one informed by a theory of transculturation. The concept of transculturation designates the processes of transformation that unfold through extended contacts and relationships between cultures. The term and its cognates transculture/transcultural/transculturality are an explicit critique of the notion of culture, as it emerged in the humanities and the social sciences in tandem with the idea of the modern nation. The nationally framed understanding of culture continues to rest on the postulate that life-worlds of identifiable groups are ethnically bound, internally cohesive, and linguistically homogeneous spheres. Coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, the concept of transculturation undermines the stable nexus posited to exist between culture and the territorial container of the nation-state by drawing our attention to the processuality of cultural formations (Ortiz 1947/1995; for a discussion of Ortiz see Juneja 2023, 23–33).

Even as its genealogy goes back to Ortiz's writings of the 1940s on the history of Cuba, the notion of transculturation has only now matured to bring forth a distinct theoretical paradigm. By directing our attention to the complicity of disciplines and institutions with nation-building processes, it enables a critique of the epistemic foundations of disciplines such as art history and the values it transports. At the same time it provides a toolbox, which allows us to recover from the ground up the process-oriented dynamism of cultural phenomena in their concreteness. While transculturation pre-supposes for a large part spatial mobility, it is neither synonymous with nor reducible to it. Rather, its focus on developments through which forms emerge within circuits of exchange make it a field constituted relationally. As a critical perspective for art history, such a reconceptualization of culture

shows the way to rethinking the terms of the global away from its condition as a naturalized given or as an ensemble of institutional demands, towards a set of relations between units in a continual state of transformation.

A transculturally framed history of art goes beyond the principle of inclusion or additive extension, and looks instead at the transformatory processes that constitute art practice through cultural encounters and long-term relationships, whose traces can be followed back to the beginnings of history. Unlike postcolonial approaches, it views differences, not as essential to cultures and therefore absolute, but as relationally produced and negotiable. It thus provides a precise terminological apparatus to describe the many kinds of interaction that constitute the core of transculturation, involving actors, practices, and temporalities in historically specific settings. Instead of placing such diverse processes under blanket concepts, for instance 'hybridity' or 'flow' or 'circulation', a transcultural approach investigates the morphologies of encounters, that is, the relationships that unfold on and across different scales – the local, regional, national, and global – with greater precision. It has developed a more differentiated vocabulary to capture the nature of the processes through which cultural difference is negotiated: through selective appropriation, mediation, translation, reconfiguration, re-historicizing and rereading of signs, alternatively through non-communication, friction, disconnection, rejection or resistance – or through a succession or coexistence of any of these. Exploring the possible range of transactions built into these dynamics works as a safeguard against polar conceptions of identity and alterity, equally against dichotomies between complete absorption and resistance that have characterised recent studies, even as they admirably seek to write a connected art history across Europe and Asia. One such example is Belting 2008.

A transculturally framed art history underlines the importance of studying concepts as migrant notions. It questions the assumptions, based on observations from the contemporary art world, that a global

circulation of key terms – art, image, vision, portrait, originals and copies, to name a few – used ubiquitously also stand for a shared universe of meaning across the globe. It also takes a more nuanced view of the phenomenon of epistemic violence espoused by postcolonial theory, held to be inflicted by imposing 'Western' analytical frames on 'non-Western' cultures. Instead, it argues that when concepts migrate – as for example they did from the Western world to Asian contexts – they disconnect from their original moorings while taking roots in new cultural settings. This is a process of transculturation where conceptual categories – like the notion of art itself – absorb other subterranean concepts, or become entangled with different practices and understandings, sometimes also producing conflicting positions within a single region. Studying these dynamics requires, first, taking a close look at the negotiation between different linguistic sources; secondly, it needs to extend the formation of a concept beyond purely lexical definitions – in particular for art history – to investigate the interaction between text and visual practice that is crucial to meaning making and the production of a society's conceptual knowledge. The transcultural trajectories of the term 'art' for instance bring to light once more a dynamic of absorption, accommodation, fragmentation, and friction, which can serve as a lens through which to make sense of conflicts that erupt, increasingly on a global scale, around images and objects and cannot be adequately explained, for example, by a discourse of secular enlightenment versus religious fundamentalism (see Flood 2002; Mahmood 2009; Juneja 2018a). In the final analysis, such a reconfiguring of conceptual categories through cultural plurality would be a step in the direction of theory-building itself as a transcultural exercise undertaken from beyond, though not excluding, Euro-American loci of narratives.

What does a critically global art history conceived as transcultural process make visible? Among the many things it does is to intensify the discipline's focus on objects and practices by reading them not as discrete phenomena, but themselves as a bundle of multiple

interlinked processes that unfold at varying speeds and intensities. It demands that the art historian tease out and describe the strands of this mutable assemblage. This approach can preclude the art historical impasse, we frequently come up against, between a formalism that engages objects in a closed semantic circle of the present and a contextualism that privileges the singular moment and location of a work's production, all circumscribed within a fixed spatial and temporal unit. Its potential lies in bringing unasked questions about the past that were suppressed or elided to the forefront of art historical narratives. Such elisions have often been a result of unasked questions following from the different parochialisms within which the discipline has remained trapped – Eurocentrism, but also methodological nationalism and the segregation of regions through 'area studies'. Investigating the dynamics of art making from different regions and bringing these experiences onto a shared matrix, together with understanding concepts as transcultured, can help create a more plausible theoretical scaffolding for the discipline to respond to the challenge of cultural plurality.

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