

Global Art History

Why Tell Art Histories Transculturally – Today and Tomorrow?

Monica Juneja

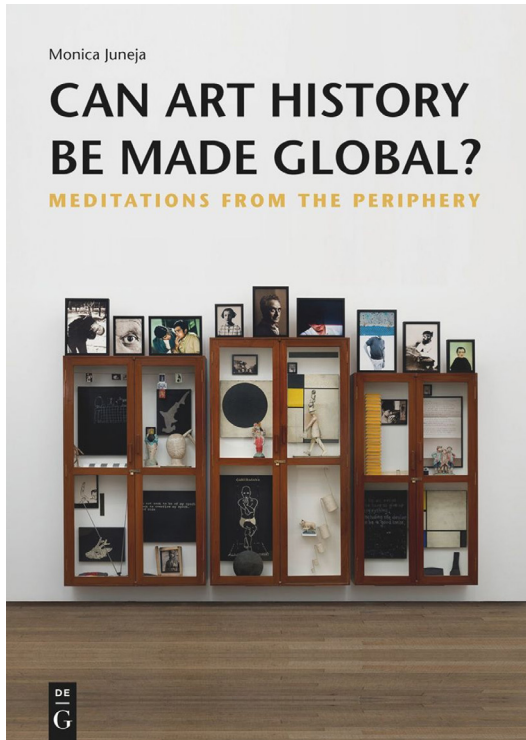
Can Art History Be Made Global? Meditations from the Periphery. Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter 2023. 352 p.
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The question Monica Juneja poses in her compelling book *Can Art History Be Made Global?* can be answered with a simple 'yes'. But this is just the start of a long trajectory we have to take and we need all hands on deck. Making art history global is not a single-person endeavour but a joint enterprise and a considerable effort. We all, art historians and art scholars from around the world, need to do our part. This requires a number of related things: rethinking, reevaluating, and revising the dominant narratives that rule(d) the discipline and their historiography; a thorough theoretical underpinning of what resulted from the long-term relationships following from global journeys and en-

counters; and a detailed knowledge of cultural specificities, traditions, and interculturalizing processes, even more complicated by the tangled relationships between nations and cultures, and nationalism and globalisation. It means: knowing the discipline's historiography, theories, and methods, its institutions, and art-in-context through the ages worldwide – the sum total of a global art history, and a current, pressing issue.

Euro-American Hegemony in Art History

Obviously, it is impossible for one person to encompass all of this; this is why it not only is a joint venture, but also implies a recognition of the need for revision, an awareness of where the discipline has brought us. Moreover, it means taking art history beyond the Euro-American paradigm that has passed its expiration date by far. Monica Juneja asserts that art history as a modern scholarly field cannot plausibly be viewed as a purely 'Western' discipline, because "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." (Juneja 2023, 15) In the course of a gradually globalising art historical discourse that occurred roughly in the last decades of the twentieth century, this certainly applies, but fact is that the discipline originated and took shape in the German speaking countries in the mid-nineteenth century. Chapter 1 (on which more later on) addresses this genealogy, but a more pressing question is, what happened since the discipline's inception? Which direction did the discipline take after its initial beginnings, when

the 'battle' between two emerging main directions, that of a *Kunstwissenschaft* (a thoroughly systematic study of art) and a *Kunstgeschichte* (an Art History) was won by the latter. Moreover, in the early days of the discipline getting shape, it was not focusing on one particular development or region per se. Rather, it was open to the 'high-cultures' of the world, encapsulated under the term *Weltkunstgeschichte* (World Art History).

In my view, 'the West' eloped with the discipline by gradually appropriating, colonising it – if you like, increasingly excluding 'art from elsewhere' (in Okwui Enwezor words), and discarding philosophical and discursive texts from past and present beyond the North-Atlantic. In the past decades, in the era of decolonisation and post-colonialism, the idea of a world art history was revitalised as a necessity to do justice to the richness and interconnectedness of art worldwide. One of its incentives is a modern and contemporary art that has emerged and is present everywhere, testifying to all kinds of inter- (or in Juneja's words) transcultural developments dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century and before. Meanwhile, in art circles and academia, the Euro-American hegemony is increasingly challenged, and rightly so. As is becoming widely acknowledged, art and culture themselves attest the intricate, pluriform sources and movements, or as Kwame Anthony Appiah so aptly expresses it in his fascinating book *The Lies That Bind. Rethinking Identity* (2018): "All cultural practices and objects are mobile; they like to spread, and almost all are themselves creations of intermixture." (Appiah 2018, 208) Intermixture as a premise refutes ideas of a fixed ownership of culture, and even the more so when culture gets conflated with 'nation-state'. Perhaps a bit boldly, Appiah says: "Western civilization is not at all a good idea and Western culture is no improvement." (Ibid., 191) That is, implying something coherent ('Western', i.e. the North-Atlantic) and excluding its alleged opposite, the 'non-West', encompassing the whole of Africa, Asia, and Latin-America, and thus lumping together a whole lot of extremely different societies. "No Local-

ity," adds Juneja, "however specific its dynamics, is sealed off from others." (31)

Centre – Periphery Revisited

In Juneja's book, a critique of Euro- or Western-centrism is implied, but is not the objective of her research; rather, she aims at explicating art and culture's (worldwide) dynamic mobility and the interaction with other units, framed by a critical globality based on the, in her study expounded, theory of transculturation. This challenging enterprise results in a well-structured and extremely rich study that draws on many years of scholarly expertise in the growing field of global art history and from more than a decade of research, teaching and intellectual exchanges with students and colleagues in academia, museums, and heritage institutes. Being appointed the first Professor of Global Art History at Heidelberg University, the first in the German-speaking countries, Juneja is one of the co-shapers of this budding field of doing art history from a global perspective. The strength of the book is that it encompasses and unites several perspectives: on a macro-level, because of its historiographical scope, it is a survey- and reference book, and methodologically it lays the theoretical foundation for a transcultural approach to art; on a micro-level, it offers closely analysed case studies.

But saying this is just scratching the surface of the book. Let us take a deeper dive into the chapters. Apart from the Introduction, which includes the framework of a theory of transculturation, and a Postscript, the book has five chapters: it tapers from a broad historiographical and conceptual outline (Chapter 1), 'the visual' itself as subject of historical investigation (Chapter 2), to three subsequent chapters, each revolving around a particular theoretical notion or concept and elucidated with case-studies from South Asia – hence the subtitle of the book *Meditations from the Periphery*.

In the introduction the foundation is laid, clarifying notions such as 'global' and the rhetoric on globalisation vis a vis issues of art, identity and the

nation-state, neoliberal economics and politics – all sorts of impediments in need of being addressed, and ideally overcome. The main argument that centres around the flow and circulation of art, ideas, and practices throughout the ages and around the globe, parallels how the author herself moves within and throughout the discursive field. This field is as vast as it is amorphous; some direction is given in an extensive footnote encapsulating studies that have aimed at dealing with ‘the global’. (13–14) For further orientation or study it is of course useful to have them listed together, but it would have been interesting to see more of a positioning and contextualisation of the various studies, and how they relate and respond to each other.

Transculturation and the Visual

The paragraph ‘Transculturation as Critical Globality’ forms the heart of the Introduction, the theory on which the subsequent chapters are built. Juneja explains the concept of the transcultural as follows: “A transculturally framed history of art goes beyond the principle of additive extension and looks instead at the transformative processes that constitute art practice through cultural encounters and long-term relationships, whose traces can be followed back to the beginnings of history.” (27) These transformative processes regard not just art itself, but also the concepts, which, as migrant notions, change in use and meaning in different contexts and over time. The transcultural is preferred over concepts such as multicultural (cultures put side by side and not connected; this is the same reason why, in our *World Art Studies* book, we opted for the term ‘interculturalization’, emphasizing processes of entanglement; Wilfried van Damme and Kitty Zijlmans [Eds.], *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Amsterdam 2008); transnational (going beyond individual nation-state boundaries, but not disentangling ‘nation’ and ‘culture’); and it also leaves behind the (hierarchical) binaries of thinking in terms of ‘the West’ versus ‘the non-West’, or ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ as fixed domains. In contrast, the goal is to investigate

the morphologies of relationships. And here lies the challenge. Relationships imply entanglements and dynamics, changes on various levels and in different forms: art, practices, concepts, discourse, institutions, and these interactive processes that make for a globally connected art history, need to be disentangled and dissected. This means that in every single case (micro-level), a single thread needs to be unravelled from the tangle and scrutinized how it got intertwined with others. This is to recover constitutive forms of encounter and relationships that unfolded at any historical juncture. This is what Juneja demonstrates in Chapters 3–5, meticulous research into the complexity of relationships on local, regional, national and global scales. Moreover, to overcome the pitfall of addressing art and entanglements ‘elsewhere’ merely following the North-Atlantic paradigms, Juneja proposes to allow theory-building from beyond of what she calls “the unmarked Euro-American centre of dominant narratives”. (33)

Her in-depth knowledge of the art and culture of South Asia allows her to weave a new fabric of narratives and insights, interconnected with what happened ‘elsewhere’, here meaning the North Atlantic, as the case-studies (more on them further on) demonstrate. Before going to this part of the book, I will briefly touch upon the topic of Chapter 2, the visual. The fact that we deal with the visual, with vision and how it gets shaped, how the visual materialises, and with the relationship between image-making and -perception, is a central aspect of each art historical investigation. Images are both intermixtures and mediators between worlds themselves.

Juneja enters the topic by looking at a work of art. Over forty colour plates and fifteen black-and-white images and figures scaffold the argument, here in Chapter 2, a seventeenth-century miniature from the Mughal Emperor Jahangir Album showing artists at work. Making a case in point, the representation(s) show an image about image-making, painting as a form of knowledge-dissemination, and the circulation of motifs, pictorial units, and the like. With further visual material in ten more colour plates, Juneja

analyses what makes up the visual, which strategies are employed and what kind of transcultural entanglement have occurred, such as religious ones (a/o Christianity), cultural (spatial illusion, different pictorial modes of how the 'seen' is translated into the image), and philosophical (tensions with regards to 'truth' and illusion). Concepts derived from the Persian language or early Islamic texts refine the notion of 'the visual'/'vision', making clear to what extent vision is fundamentally a cultural construct. Furthermore, the mobility of the images as material agents and the albums as distinct mediators of transculturalisation are discussed in this chapter. Her detailed investigation into such visual practices and their materialisations demonstrates knowledge ranging from materials and techniques employed, artists and their collaboration in workshops, patrons, cultural particularities and human universals.

Modernity and Inclusive Contemporaneity

Doing global art history thus means diving deep into one particular strand of the globally entangled histories of art practices, regions, and cultures, and to know how to unknot them. This produces fascinating research, as the transcultural approach is (successfully) at work to unravel such entanglements, but the question that arises is how these various case-studies get connected again into new art historical fabrics. Can we still write art *histories*? How will they look like? To disentangle a knot of strands is one thing, but how to tie things together again, weaving new narratives? This is a question that worried and still worries me too within our world art studies frame, and I have no answer yet. The macro-level has distinct features and is theorised, or is in the process of; the micro-level can be approached as Juneja aptly demonstrates in chapters 3–5, and her method can be made operational everywhere, but it seems that a meso-level is missing out. This is of course too much to ask within one single book, so, again, as a joint effort, we need to take up this challenge. We need to counter James Elkins' postulation in his latest (and last) book *The*

End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing. North Atlantic Art History and its Alternatives (2021), saying that whereas "the art world is becoming more diverse and inclusive, writing about art is becoming less diverse and more uniform". (7) Juneja disagrees with this, her book aims at refuting precisely that, but the North Atlantic paradigm has settled firmly in the centre of the discourse, and is quite persistent. A thorough revision of this dominant practice, its premises, theoretical frames and historiography requires the commitment and contribution of scholars from around the world. Back to chapters 3–5, their baseline is similar to that of the previous chapter: a historically and theoretically framed enquiry into a topical aspect of art history writing, visualised by examples and case-studies from South Asia. Chapter 3 deals with probably the hottest issue in art history: modernism, including an expansion to its alleged counterpart, 'primitivism', forming a persistent intertwined pair, elucidated by a number of cases from India. In this chapter, Juneja advocates for a transcultural modernism disengaged from the dominant, fixed idea of modernity's origin and development that is firmly situated in 'the West'. Not only was modernism international and transcultural from its inception, the European modern was from the onset fuelled by 'other' cultural sources due to colonialism and transcultural exchange. This dynamic of intertwined relationships leaves behind thinking in terms of 'other modernities' next to that of 'the West', but suggests a non-homogenising and non-hierarchical interconnection.

Perhaps an equally pressing issue is the notion of the contemporary, or contemporaneity (Terry Smith), the subject of Chapter 4. Also here a 'periphery-in' approach is taken with a focus on South Asia: contemporary art understood as a de-centred, networked and multi-local field and also not detached from modernism, nor as its continuation. The contemporary is marking the present, but also recollects the past; notions such as 'avant-garde', 'nation' and 'locality' are features to address; furthermore, it has a political connotation. This already hard to untie complex is complicated by several perspectives (the archive,

the body, participatory art) that are also included. Even though they are most certainly relevant for 'the contemporary', here they confuse, rather than clarify. The reference to 'the archive' points at artworks as archival legacies that store historical narratives, traditions, memory. The work of some Indian artists give a glimpse of the complexity of relationships with other works and concepts, as each case requires careful study. Two more angles, the body and participatory art, conclude the chapter. Although relevant topics to discuss in the context of the contemporary, in the frame of this book, they are a little too much of a stress, as if the author fears to exclude possible viewpoints. This makes the ending of the chapter somewhat messy and incoherent, it is simply a bit too much.

A Compass to Art History as a Global Project

Centring around the equally praised and disputed 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*, Chapter 5 is more closely knit than the previous chapter. It embraces the globe in the sense that it departs from Jean-Hubert Martin's milestone exhibition and moves from there to the peripheries (with, as previously, examples from South Asia), tracing a connected history of this first 'whole earth show'. I find it a sympathetic and fair reading of *Magiciens*, because, whether in the positive or the negative, the exhibition is always referred to, it *has* made a difference, it is a manifest point of reference. The excursion at the end of the chapter to the subject of Indigeneity adds to the argument of aiming for an inclusive contemporaneity, flown in from the periphery.

The Postscript, lastly, moves from the global to the planetary, suggesting a non-anthropocentric art history. It takes into account the more-than-human, introducing another ethical regime to recalibrate culture as a joint venture together with the non-human. Considering the state of the planet today, this may be more pressing than anything.

This book is a major accomplishment, rich in its theorizing, thinking, and execution, and erudite in both its scope and depth; it is agile and eloquent in its language. The text is dense and requires one's full attention, but with a rewarding outcome. It stimulates thinking otherwise, a compass to move anew through the field of the global, art history as a global project, with numerous challenges to get started oneself.