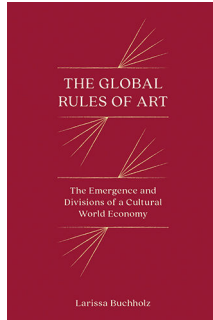


LARISSA BUCHHOLZ, *THE GLOBAL  
RULES OF ART. THE EMERGENCE AND  
DIVISIONS OF A CULTURAL WORLD  
ECONOMY*

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Reviewed by  
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It is a real challenge to read sociologist of culture Larissa Buchholz's book *The Global Rules of Art. The Emergence and Divisions of a Cultural World Economy*. Because of its extent and depth, the reading was quite an effort but it was equally rewarding. While on the one hand, because of the dense argumentation and the scope in material, geography, and theory it covers, one needs to be on guard at all times not to miss a train of thought or an elaboration; on the other hand, the book is crystal clear in its structure, and oftentimes Larissa Buchholz pauses and either reflects on what has been discussed, or refers back or to what is to come. This gives the reader time to catch her breath.

Now what is the book about? In short, Buchholz demonstrates what happens when – in terms of what the German sociologist and philosopher of social science Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998) elaborated in his dynamic systems theory (1984) – the art system and the economic system clash or converge, or to put it differently, when the two systems start interfering and interferences blur the communication codes. That means that the art system increasingly adapted

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to using the monetary discourse of the economic system: to have or not to have, that is, art seen in terms of monetary/commercial and not artistic value. In short: artistic recognition or commercial benefit, art or dollars? But, as Buchholz argues, interestingly, success in the art market does not necessarily have to correlate with artistic value, as the cases of Gabriel Orozco and Yue Minjun show. The relationships between success at the market and/or artistic valuation are much more complex and rely on many factors, that, for clarity, Buchholz has divided into three perspectives on macro, meso, and micro levels, respectively the global expansion of the art world, the careers of worldwide leading artists, and the trajectories of individual artists, brokers, and buyers. Demonstrating how entangled this got in the past four decades and how to unravel again this tangle, is one of Buchholz's achievements.

Set in the contemporary era, Buchholz examines how since the 1980s the contemporary art world expanded and diversified into a cultural world economy, how under the influence of expanding financial markets, cultural brokerage, the biennialization of art, geopolitics, and identity politics oscillating between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, the art world globalized. Before diving deeper into this intricate, multidimensional interconnection of artistic value, cultural distinction, geopolitics, money, and the still relative, if not total, omnipresence of the Western art canon, auction houses, and art galleries/gallerists, first a bit more about the structure of the book and the methods deployed.

The structure is pyramidal and contains three parts. It tapers from the macro level of the global expansion of the art field (Part I: Chapters 2–3), to the meso level regarding the careers of worldwide leading artists and their diversity (Part II: Chapters 4–5), to the micro level, the trajectories of two individual artists, Gabriel Orozco from Mexico and Yue Minjun from China (both born in 1962), as well as their cultural brokers and “those who symbolically or materially appropriate art” – obviously a larger group than just the buyers (Part III: Chapters 6–7). Chapter 8 recapitulates and contests the often alleged assumption that globalization is nothing more than Westernization. *The Global Rules of Art* counters this by introducing a global cultural fields approach, drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, of which more later.

Empirically the book is grounded in a vast array of quantitative and qualitative data and mixed-method research design – such as hierarchal clustering, historical analysis, content and interpretative discourse analyses, and a biographical case-study method. These are scrutinized in four appendices – which I list here because they correspond with the succession of the parts/chapters and express the methodical scrutiny. Appendix A provides a sampling of International Art Biennials (Chapter 2); B of International Contemporary Art Fairs (Chapter 3), both corresponding with the macro level; C of Elite Artists in the Global Auction Market and Global Exhibition Space (Chapter 5; meso level); and D a Comparative Case Selection (Chapters 6 and 7; micro level). Since a too West-centrist view is

always lurking because it has been the hegemonic gaze, and, albeit discriminatorily, the 'default' view for so long, Buchholz takes a second-order observer position (in the sense of Niklas Luhmann), that is, a meta-perspective that enables the researcher to make visible the facts and limitations of the preceding observations. It is a theory-guided observation, and one that is itself the subject of and open to discussion. This gives a clear positioning of the researcher, but offers a less compassionate read because of its more distant tone.

Throughout the book runs a comparative analysis with regard to different cross-border subfields and the poles of a globalizing world, which makes the study even more complex. Furthermore, the study is incredibly rich in detail, amount of research, literature study, references, source materials, and interviews. At times even a bit too detailed, bringing in more concepts, for instance in Chapter 5 (the meso level) "Diversity and Careers in a Dual Cultural World Economy", in which artists' careers are distinguished into four "main ideal types of successful careers in the globalizing field": autonomous (Mid-Garde), semi-autonomous (Consecrated Elite), semi-heteronomous (Winner-Take-All), and heteronomous (Commercial Stars). These indications are elaborated and supported by statistics, so they make sense, but it is just a bit too much to take in at times, and especially to take all this information along with you as a reader to the next chapters. In short, there is much to digest and remember.

It is time now to dwell a little longer on how Bourdieu's theory of field is interwoven throughout the book, but also disputed and complemented. Whereas the book relies heavily on Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production (cf. *The Rules of Art*, 1992), Buchholz also furthers this model into what she calls a "dual cultural world economy". This model is clearly explained in Chapter 4, departing from Bourdieu's theory of field of cultural production (which centers on the *opposition* between artistic recognition and commercial success) and his (later) "market convergence model" – a two-stage pattern based on the assumption that commercial success ("economic capital") relies on prior approval of art experts first ("specific economic capital"). Buchholz shows convincingly that in studying global dynamics of artists' recognition, the distinction between art value and commercial success blurs into many shades of "art"- "money" combinations, not just a simple opposition. The art-money spectrum is a complex one, in which not always the market triumphs. Although the contemporary art field's globalization coincided with the rise of commercial forces, it is Buchholz's contention that this did not just mean a merger between "high art" and "the market" into one monolithic global art industry; to the contrary, it shows a growing divergence between expert and market selection. I can only support this claim. Even though big money still rules in the sense of prestigious art purchases for major, well-funded museums, art institutions, auction houses, and wealthy art collectors, there is a whole global world out there of artists, artist

groups, and artist initiatives that are highly valued in artistic – and oftentimes societal – terms. Their art makes a difference, not in terms of money, but in terms of effect and affect.

The three levels of the pyramid are not separate fields but are interdependent and transformations that take place have an effect on the macro, meso, and micro levels. To better grasp how this goes, we need to dive a bit deeper into this tension field. At the base of the pyramid is the extending global artistic field under the influence of three major transformations: the worldwide spread of international art biennials and a growing non-commercial exhibition infrastructure for contemporary art since the 1980s; the rise of global discourses in art criticism; and the foundation of new global institutions for artistic evaluation (*inter alia* biennialization, new art prizes, new online artist ranking, a form of global reception). However, although this is a global field in flux, big inequalities and power imbalances are still at play. Galleries in the international art market, although a global ascendance occurs, are still dominated by cities such as New York and London, and international art fairs and big auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's still hold major power positions. But, even though these major players are factors that must be taken into account, Buchholz shows that the palette is more diverse.

On the meso level, Buchholz explains how the contemporary art field's globalization may have coincided with the rise of commercial forces, but that this did not result per se in a merger of the formerly divided world of so-called "high art" and "the market" into one monolithic global art industry. In contrast, a growing bifurcation occurs of "expert" and "market" selection systems, as Table 4.1 exemplifies (throughout the chapters are numerous tables and graphs to support Buchholz's claims). Moreover, on the commercial side, regional, national, and global markets operate relatively independently as well as interact and respond to each other, enhancing the accumulation of economic capital in all cases. The global changes at the cultural pole have been less affected by economic forces. Buchholz sees the cultural and commercial global subfields as having drifted farther apart in their infrastructures, geographies, and currencies of symbolic and economic valuation. She argues for seeing globalization in its diversity – perhaps more in tandem with what is also referred to as "mondialization", the more positive response to global changes, taking into account both the equality and the diversity of global citizens, the different phases and paces of regions and communities worldwide.

However, there is a caveat, although artists' careers may circulate transcontinentally, divergent patterns come to the fore. To expand on this, Buchholz introduces the above-mentioned four ideal career types (Chapter 5). Although this does help to understand how economic and symbolic capital have operated along divergent tracks in various geographies worldwide, it is a challenge to keep track of the lines of argumentation of this multi-perspectival approach. It does make clear though, that there is not a one-size-fits-all model, but that the situation differs from region and in time.

Whereas a high degree of globality has become the hallmark of elite careers, so Buchholz affirms, the careers of these artists still depend on being firmly present in a few institutional centers in the global northwest (most particularly New York and London). This conclusion echoes in another study I would like to mention briefly. In his latest and final book on art history titled *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing. North Atlantic Art History and Its Alternatives* (2021),<sup>1</sup> James Elkins puts forward that, although the art world is becoming more diverse and inclusive, writing about art is becoming less diverse and more uniform – and this impending uniformity is spreading, largely unremarked. He sees this “how” of art history written in a standard North Atlantic idiom. Obviously, this needs to change, to be diversified, to move away from the center-periphery binary, and needs to look at modernism’s international (read: global) logic, which it had from the start; at the local, regional, provincial, even the parochial; at circulations (see Buchholz); at the local understanding of an artist’s practice; at ‘unfamiliar’ indigenous concepts. In short, the diversity in art historical writing needs to be profoundly explored. Here lies a task for many an art scholar. Even though ‘the West’ is still predominant – in many respects still is the dominant voice – it is not invisible anymore; it is increasingly being challenged, countered, and called to account, and rightly so.

Back to Buchholz. Part III, the micro level, follows and compares the careers of two famed artists: Gabriel Orozco from Mexico and Yue Minjun from China. Although they may be equally known, their paths are as wide apart as their art. Following the two in, respectively, Chapters 6 and 7, the macro, meso, and micro levels are made truly operational, and offer a fascinating read. It is impossible to summarize the elaborate scrutinization of the careers, but highly condensed: whereas Orozco was picked up by influential, mainly Western intermediaries because of his highly conceptual artwork – recognized as such by powerful art galleries (*inter alia* New York) and catering to their reigning aesthetic tastes, at the same time he also extended the Eurocentric art canon, making it more inclusive because of his Mexican background. He was interesting because he was both different (Mexican) and the same (conceptual artist). Minjun can be seen as his complete opposite: his career path (which was not so obvious from the outset at all – read the chapter), as a ‘non-Western’ artist, took a meteoric (commercial) rise because the art market and collectors took an interest in China (changing political-economic status in the global order). In contrast to Orozco, who was valued for his cosmopolitan universalism, Minjun was valued because of his ‘Chineseness’, and because his paintings were recognized as a form of Pop Art. Not Orozco’s cosmopolitan universalism but a universal legibility nevertheless. So, in both cases ‘the West’ still had a big finger in the pie.

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James Elkins, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing. North Atlantic Art History and Its Alternatives*, Berlin/Boston, MA 2021.

The scope of the book is best reflected in the sub-title “The Emergence and Divisions of a Cultural World Economy”. What becomes clear is that the two, the rise and disunions, go together, including the pushing and pulling forces on all levels, between the levels, between market and art valuation. What is also clear is how important are the intermediaries (who you happen to know, who happens to pick you up), local differences, and changing tastes. This is an amazingly rich study, with a high level of density, complexity, and nuance, a reference book for now and future generations. With Buchholz in mind, it will be exciting to see how the global art world(s) will change further.