



## ART HISTORY IN THE WILDERNESS

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Review of "Crossing Boundaries: Making World Art History," April 18 and May 9, 2016.

*Editor's Note: "Crossing Boundaries: Making World Art History" was held in four day-long sessions at the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU throughout the Spring 2016 and Fall 2016 semesters. The dates for all four sessions were April 18, May 9, September 26 and November 4, 2016. This text responds to the Spring sessions only.*

In April and May of this year, the Institute of Fine Arts held the first two of four planned workshops addressing the recent development of global art history. Organized by Patricia Rubin (Judy and Michael Steinhardt Director, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University) and Alexandra Munroe (Samsung Senior Curator & Senior Advisor of Global Arts, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) with the assistance of PhD candidates Julia Pelta Feldman, Kara Fiedorek, Madeline Murphy Turner, and Allison K. Young, and MA candidate Rebecca Cuomo, the workshops were grouped under the heading of "Crossing Boundaries," with the hope of interrogating current limitations of the field and proposing new practices. The boundaries in question were not just national or regional limitations, but the "traditional boundaries of art history" as well as "institutional boundaries."<sup>1</sup> Taking advantage of the Institute's "convening power," as Munroe put it in her introduction, these informal gatherings brought together an array of U.S.-based scholars, curators, and arts professionals. Rather than present in a traditional conference format, participants were invited to converse informally in a series of themed panels. Attendance was only by invitation. What took place in the first two conferences was a thoughtful discussion in which a number of senior scholars, representing a variety of different sub-disciplines within art history, grappled with issues that, it soon became clear, have come to demarcate something of a paradigm shift in the field of art history.

In the past several years, the global has once again emerged as a pressing point of concern, particularly with respect to curatorial practice. In the New York area, the C-MAP (Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives) project at the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim's UBS MAP Global Art Initiative stand as the two most prominent efforts on the part of museums to expand their horizons.<sup>2</sup> On the West Coast, *Pacific Standard Time* has charged Southern Californian institutions to move "beyond borders" and spotlight work from underrepresented regions, with its second iteration next year focusing on Latin America.<sup>3</sup> This is not

a new phenomenon. Precedents can be found in the second Bienal de La Habana (1986), which brought together work from the Global South, and in the more conflicted *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Pompidou (1989), both examples cited in the workshop discussions. More recently, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* at the Queens Museum of Art (1999) and documenta 11 (2002) serve as key milestones. Indeed, from this rough genealogy it might be inferred that the “global” gains currency in moments of geopolitical crisis. We might identify those moments as, respectively, the intensification and resolution of Cold War hostilities in the 1980s; the advent and institutionalization of the War on Terror; and, at this moment, the disturbing rise of explicitly authoritarian, xenophobic, and racist sentiment in a period of economic and ecological emergency—all instances in which profound ideological gulfs are revealed or deepened by the shrinking of the world technologically, digitally, and politically.

One of the successes of “Crossing Boundaries” lay in the concerted effort to periodize the global within a contemporary condition of neoliberal consolidation and digital interconnectivity. This came across most forcefully in the comments made by David Joselit (Distinguished Professor in the History of Art, CUNY Graduate Center) for the first panel, which was dedicated to “Terminologies and Methodologies.” Setting out to define a usable set of terms for the group, Joselit posited the *international* as a framework that is predicated upon the indivisibility of the nation-state as a cultural unit, whereas the more expansive *transnational* makes room for modalities that cross, connect, or dismiss political and geographic boundaries. The *global*, meanwhile, is a product of globalization and its presumptions of market deregulation, environmental conflict, and the universality of liberal democracy.<sup>4</sup> Given that the *global* functions as the operative term for these workshops, it is revealing that this conversation was hosted by an institution that has branded itself a global university through the establishment of satellite centers in financial capitals such as Abu Dhabi and Shanghai. This was a fact that remained largely unspoken at the workshops, but we must not lose sight of the institutional and economic armature that has enabled these conversations to take place, for the irony is that contemplating the global requires both access and mobility: access in the form of membership within a selective community, and the mobility afforded by time and funding to attend the various biennials, exhibitions, and symposia dedicated to the subject.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, this is a condition that arises from the field’s imbrication in an international art market and the rarefied nature of the academy, but it does raise an important, unanswered question: who is the global *for*?

As a methodology, the global is currently formulated primarily by and for the so-called West. This was a general concern for several in attendance at the Institute, who cautioned against the threat of an art history of one-way influence, in which ideas formulated in the center are dispersed outward into a periphery. Tim Barringer (Paul Mellon Professor of the History of Art, Yale University) astutely argued that the dominant additive model of the global amounts to little more than a neocolonialist enterprise that reaffirms a normative hierarchy of values. By prioritizing artists and works that most easily fold into preexisting discourses, this model diminishes new entrants into the canon as essentially derivative, belated, or unexceptional. In his remarks on the circulation of objects in Southeast Asia, Yukio Lippit (Professor of History of Art and Architecture,

Harvard University) also stressed the danger that a global art history would erect a secondary canon of “object-types” that too comfortably perpetuates the power relations it sets out to critique, such as merchant capitalism and Christian evangelism. Proposed as a corrective measure to these risks was what Munroe termed a history of “cross-semination” rather than dissemination: generative transnational encounters marked by reciprocal exchange. The most productive examples of this more egalitarian art history were elaborated by Ming Tiampo (Associate Professor of Art History, Carleton University) and Reiko Tomii (independent scholar), who both invoked Japanese critic Haryū Ichirō’s formulation of the “international contemporary” as a point of departure. Declaring the need to decolonize the academy and envision scholarship in terms of multidimensional narratives, Tiampo proposed a “worlded art history.” This worlding imagines the unfolding of theories and practices from multiple perspectives, favoring “the production of mutual alienation” over the biased process of familiarization so prevalent in articulations of the global.

Tomii more directly cited Ichirō to a similar end, marshaling the “international contemporary” to advocate for multiple chronologies that are contemporaneous with one another, but not seamless. This approach to the global seeks to complicate the power relations between the center and what Tomii termed “the wilderness,” most frequently by invoking subaltern theories and discourses and, less assuredly, proposing their application beyond the contexts of their origin. (In a similar vein, Ferreria Gullar’s theory of the non-object was suggested in one instance as a potential point of entry into global considerations of abstraction.) This is a laudable and productive strategy, and one that has been effectively deployed in Tomii’s own studies of postwar Japanese art.<sup>6</sup> Yet I would also contend that it comes with its own perils: if too hastily applied, the notion of the “wilderness” can only reaffirm a geopolitical hierarchy in which the center and the periphery remain stable constructs. The former, in the imaginary of the global, retains its New York–Paris axis and is predominantly white, masculine, and upper class; the latter supplies its inverse. But might we consider the West a kind of wilderness in its own right? The continued, albeit renegotiated, importance of the West was most passionately defended by Munroe, who spoke in favor of a repositioning or interrogation, as opposed to a full displacement. But to be somewhat polemical, I would in fact argue *in favor of* the displacement of the West, or rather of our own presumptions of what it constitutes. In the U.S. alone, what of Asian-American, Latinx, black, indigenous, and diasporic artists, for example? How do they fit into the global? And to pursue this line of questioning further, what of artists or practitioners working in fields which, at present, we might be reticent to identify as art? So much of the global turn is driven by appeals to inclusivity and diversity. It is imperative that the expansion of the geographic borders of art history does not entail the hardening of our disciplinary ones.

That this journey into the wilderness is beginning to place scholars and curators outside their comfort zones most directly affects a younger generation. This generation, which was notably less represented than the more senior experts who have witnessed the global shift from a significantly different vantage point, is now expected to possess more diverse areas of expertise and a much more extensive methodological skill set. The organization of the field, however, hinders these developments. To bring this into the realm of my own experience, my field

of study is modern and contemporary art of the Americas, and thus I am faced with a question of self-definition: namely, do I consider myself a Latin Americanist, or a modernist with an emphasis in Latin America? The scholarly scope of the Latin Americanist is presumed to be limited by geography but not chronology, and thus she is responsible for all art, architecture, and visual culture of the region, from pre-Conquest societies to the present day. The modernist faces quite the opposite scenario, as her field is temporally constructed but, in the new global paradigm, transnational. She can move more comfortably between geographic regions and is thus expected to have a deep familiarity with the proliferation of modernisms across the world. And because of their seemingly divergent areas of expertise, there is an implicit methodological split as well. Setting aside the reality that “Latin America” is itself a political construct, the regional specificity of the former lends itself more towards social art history, which can often verge on the anthropological; the latter, in its emphasis on transnational exchange, has tended to be more theoretical and, a bit more problematically, formally comparativist in nature. Remarks by Ilona Katzew (Curator and Head of Latin American Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art) and Anna Indych-López (Professor of Twentieth-Century Latin American Art, City College of New York and CUNY Graduate Center) attested to this fairly field-specific debate, but the problem is instructive more generally: the academic and museological architecture of the field forecloses much of the methodological innovation that was called for at the workshop. What is needed, as Barringer outlined, is a dramatic, interdisciplinary broadening of the tools at our disposal.

In thinking about the global in all of its promises and pitfalls, I am drawn to a source that is most decidedly not art historical, at least as we currently define it. There is a scene in the 1997 biopic *Selena*, about Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla, in which the protagonist’s father Abraham (played by Edward James Olmos) explains the unique cultural burden placed upon Mexican-Americans. “We gotta be twice as perfect as anybody else,” he laments. “I mean we gotta know about John Wayne *and* Pedro Infante. We gotta know about Frank Sinatra *and* Agustín Lara. We gotta know about Oprah *and* Cristina. . . . It’s exhausting!” This kind of double knowledge has long been expected of artists, scholars, and curators working from any historically marginalized position, and as Lynn Gumpert (Director, Grey Art Gallery, New York University) noted in a panel on “Curating the Global,” it is a responsibility never asked from those in the U.S. and Western Europe. Yet Abraham, in the *Selena* passage, continues: “Japanese-Americans, Italian-Americans, German-Americans? Their homeland is on the other side of the ocean.” He gestures to the Río Grande: “Ours is right next door, right over there.” “Crossing Boundaries,” and the larger global turn, has signaled a shift in which we are finally seeing the rest of the world as “right next door, right over there.” No longer can the canon remain sealed off with the occasional incursion by Gutai or Neo-Concretism; rather, we are all responsible for a much broader, much more nuanced understanding of art history than what previously may have been expected, familiar, or comfortable. The conversations at the Institute reflected profound anxiety but also a spirit of unexpected optimism. But in our optimism we cannot voraciously rush headlong into new territory; a displacement is, ultimately, necessary. It is my hope that future conversations (ideally with a more international and more generationally mixed roster of participants) take the form of a kind of *encuentro*, a respectful meeting in which we, here in what was formerly the center, respectfully cede our ground and, more

than anything, listen—to new voices, to new points of view, and to new possibilities.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> An introductory summary of the “Crossing Boundaries” workshops as well as a full schedule of speakers can be found at [www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/fineart/events/crossingboundaries.htm](http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/fineart/events/crossingboundaries.htm).

<sup>2</sup> For more information on C-MAP’s efforts to “research . . . art in a global context,” see [www.moma.org/learn/intnlprograms/globalresearch](http://www.moma.org/learn/intnlprograms/globalresearch). To a similar end, the Guggenheim UBS MAP initiative promises to “create direct access to contemporary art and education on a global scale”: [www.guggenheim.org/map](http://www.guggenheim.org/map).

<sup>3</sup> This edition of *Pacific Standard Time* is titled *LA/LA: A Celebration Beyond Borders*, and as such it deploys a similar vocabulary of expanded horizons. See [www.pacificstandardtime.org](http://www.pacificstandardtime.org).

<sup>4</sup> Joselit further puts these terms into play as they manifest in the recent exhibitions of “‘International Pop’ and ‘The World Goes Pop,’” *Artforum* 54.5 (January 2016): 230–31.

<sup>5</sup> Video recordings of the “Crossing Boundaries” workshops have been posted on the website cited above. To this end the discussion could be described as semi-public: the proceedings are open and available to all who may be interested, but active participation is restricted only to those invited and physically present.

<sup>6</sup> Tomii’s stances on the “wilderness” and “international contemporaneity” are most fully elaborated in *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016).