



The "Global Turn" as a Disciplinary Future for Art History

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Image [modified]: Chair that belonged to the vodunce Laura Costa Santos (1904-1979) of Ewejeje Nation, daughter of the terreiro of Manezinho de Oxossi. Donation by Walter Rocha to the Afro-Brazilian Museum/UFBA .

The "Global Turn" as a Disciplinary Future for Art History

A "virada global" como um futuro disciplinar para a História da Arte

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ABSTRACT

Discussions about the "global turn" in Art History are gaining more and more space. Since the end of the last century, art historians have turned their procedures and methods towards deepening the connections, exchanges, interdependencies, mobility and visual cultures shared between geographically diverse groups. The researches carried out in this context opened new paths for materialities, works and objects little studied or known. It is increasingly necessary to encourage research that connects the various regions and cultural forms. How can the insights of regional and local studies be integrated into an inclusive international network of scholarly activity? We invite creative theoretical proposals and strategic case studies from all fields, places, and times to envision a future for global art history by focusing on connectivities, negotiated cultural differences, and dynamic historical processes. Such a disciplinary future resists the logic of economic globalization, avoids the national framing of its objects of investigation, eschews hierarchies of genre, rejects ahistorical presentism, and puts into question unexamined claims to universality.

KEYWORDS

Global Art History. Cultural Globalization. Transcultural Processes.

RESUMO

As discussões sobre a "virada global" na História da Arte estão ganhando cada vez mais espaço. Desde o final do século passado, os historiadores da arte voltaram seus procedimentos e métodos para aprofundar as conexões, trocas, interdependências, mobilidade e culturas visuais compartilhadas entre grupos geograficamente diversos. As pesquisas realizadas nesse contexto abriram novos caminhos para materialidades, obras e objetos pouco estudados ou conhecidos. É cada vez mais necessário incentivar a pesquisa que conecte as várias regiões e formas culturais. Como os insights de estudos

regionais e locais podem ser integrados em uma rede internacional inclusiva de atividades acadêmicas? Convidamos propostas teóricas criativas e estudos de caso estratégicos de todos os campos, locais e épocas para prever um futuro para a história da arte global, concentrando-nos em conectividades, diferenças culturais negociadas e processos históricos dinâmicos. Esse futuro disciplinar resiste à lógica da globalização econômica, evita o enquadramento nacional de seus objetos de investigação, evita hierarquias de gênero, rejeita o presentismo histórico e põe em causa reivindicações não examinadas de universalidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

História da Arte Global. Globalização Cultural. Processos Transculturais.

Over the past 15 years, the “global turn” has been an important factor in the transformation of the Art History discipline. The opening of the field boosted research that challenged its canonical version, marked by nationalism, styles, binary models and the division of the discipline itself (Nelson, 1997). With the critique of traditional concepts, art historians began to include new objects, such as non-European artifacts and visual culture that hardly entered the ranks of studies. Likewise, researchers turned to Western artistic achievements, focusing on the connections and complexities generated by cultural interactions.

The traditional taxonomy of art – such as ancient, medieval, Renaissance, modern, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, African, etc. – opened space for the constitution of other research units “more responsive to the logic of moving objects and artists” (Tatsch, 2020). The academic responses to the new questions came from transdisciplinarity and transculturality. The first allowed us to rethink existing disciplinary structures by borrowing analyzes from other fields, such as anthropology, history, and ethnology. Thus, it fostered knowledge beyond established borders – by circumventing disciplinary limitations and the hierarchies between them – and established new forms of knowledge. Transculturality allowed us to perceive the “processes of transformation that constitute the practice of art through

cultural encounters and relationships” (Juneja, 2011: 281). As Espagne pointed out, “every passage of a cultural object from one context to another results in a transformation of its meaning, a dynamic of resemantization” (Espagne, 2013: 1).

Transcultural research necessarily implies abandoning the concept of national artistic identities and the notion of homogeneous territories established by physical or cultural borders whose spatialization mechanism is operated by the State, from civilizational categories and universal histories established, mainly, in the 19th century. As Marcelo Cândido da Silva argued, “the realization that space is manufactured and, at the same time, the object of representations, posed for historians the problem of identifying the agents of this fabrication and these representations” (2020: 9). To escape such symbolic codifications, scholars of the “global turn” need to constitute new spaces as subjects of investigation that are “continuously defined as participants and as dependent on the historical relations in which they are involved. This would also mean approaching time and space as non-linear and non-homogeneous, defined from the logic of circulatory practices” (Juneja, 2011: 281).

There is no denying that the “global turn” in Art History was favored by the availability of textual and image sources on the internet. Undoubtedly, virtual collections increasingly encourage researchers to reconstruct the circulation and mobility of artifacts and images. In addition, they meet the needs of research that do not rely on funding from national agencies, due to the systematic cut of funds in the Humanities area, whether nationally or internationally. On the other hand, there is still a lot to do between public and private institutions that face the lack of financial resources or the contempt of public policies for digitizing the artistic objects under their protection.

Having as procedures and methods connections, exchanges, interdependencies, mobility, and visual cultures shared between geographically diverse groups, the global turnaround in Art History also

avored and opened new paths for materialities, works and objects that were little studied or known. In 2015, the Colloquium *New Worlds: Frontiers, Inclusion, Utopias* held in Rio de Janeiro and organized by the International Committee of Art History (CIHA) and the Brazilian Committee of Art History – CBHA, and funded by Terra Foundation for American Art and the Getty Foundation, had as main objective to present the recent discussions about the geopolitical displacements involved in the expansion of the field of Art History. On the occasion, Farago (2017: 289) drew attention to the circulation of material culture:

if the global turn of art history is to succeed in including the views and material culture of many constituencies, it needs to take into account cultural productions that have historically been classified into disciplinary and subdisciplinary practices separate from art history, archeology and anthropology. A practical problem arises because anything and everything manufactured by human beings potentially becomes a legitimate object of study.

It was in view of this issue that the idea of launching a dossier that could contemplate the “global turn” as a disciplinary future for the History of Art arose. Many questions troubled us. How are researches on this subject being conducted in Brazil and where to find interlocutors? How can insights from regional and local studies be integrated into an inclusive international network of academic activities?

Thus, we invited creative theoretical proposals and strategic case studies from all fields, places, and times to predict a future for global art history, focusing on connectivity, negotiated cultural differences and dynamic historical processes. This disciplinary future resists the logic of economic globalization, avoids the national framing of its objects of investigation, avoids gender hierarchies, rejects historical presentism, and calls into question unexamined claims to universality.

The challenge is to theorize about the complexities of cultural

interaction without imposing ethnocentric categories such as those that historically defined the discipline of art history on Euro-American terms. An expanded notion of what kind of objects are worthy of study and the recognition of geography as a culturally determined and ideologically freighted concept have the advantage of producing numerous regional chronologies, rather than a single linear narrative keyed to European and North American events emanating from a few urban centers. This special issue of *Modos* adopts a collaborative approach that could greatly enhance the speed and quality of research outcomes beyond Brazil, while also integrating the efforts of local scholars and regional studies into an international network of scholarly exchange without imposing an overarching conceptual framework or a uniform methodology.

Claire Farago's article opens by insisting that a socially and historically embedded understanding of any tradition of texts or objects is a primary requirement for research regardless of field. Taking up the challenge of how insights from regional and local studies can be integrated into an inclusive international network of academic activities, Farago adds to her earlier arguments on what is needed with even more fundamental questions for Brazilian scholars and others whose archives and funding depend on local and national resources (or the lack of them): what compels scholars who function within the national culture paradigm to change their ways if the new approaches are simply choices on the revolving carousel of art historical possibilities? Why should researchers transform their archives organized in terms national cultures and period style into a transcultural enterprise encompassing many kinds of material culture? The reasons for doing so are both epistemological and ethical. The idea of “art” is itself a modern concept that evolved over several centuries, initially in western European writings. If the vested position of the researcher as part of the same historical continuum as her subject of study remains outside the framework of discussion, the most significant epistemological and ethical

issues will remain unarticulated and unaddressed. The study of regions historically defined by trade is producing conceptions of geography that avoid a single linear narrative keyed to European events and pay attention to the function and value of the cultural setting in which the work of art was made and used. Yet even such a de-territorialized model for organizing the discipline according to networks of interaction does not address the European metaphysical assumptions that produced the category "art" in the first place.

The western metaphysical model of higher form shaping lower matter (in this case, the artist's or the nation's mentality are thought to be directly encoded in the formal or stylistic features of the work of art) actually frames every object *before interpretation* begins within a Eurocentric system for evaluating all works of art. Without an understanding of what makes this inherited discourse troubling, future generations will tend to reproduce the same problems in displaced form. The initial act of description needs to be rethought to make room for different epistemologies, ontologies, and world views, including complex entanglements between different cultural traditions often extending over long periods of time. What is needed is a material-based, non-transcendental ontology capacious enough to appeal to many different kinds of interpretative aims. As the individual articles in this issue of *Modos* collectively demonstrate by focusing on the heterogeneity of the artwork itself, when different styles and even entirely different systems of signification come into contact, they open up many other considerations, such as what happens when values, beliefs, and information are not held in common. Fundamental epistemological and ontological differences, some of which are incommensurable, deserve to be discussed and debated because the knowledge scholars produce has long-ranging effects far beyond the immediate contributions our studies are designed to make.

Franziska Koch examines artistic strategies formulated in the Fluxus network during the 1960s, spanning Europe, East Asia, and the USA, as

an important reference when searching for ways to write art history in a transcultural global framework. She focuses on Nam June Paik's (self)positioning in negotiation with the taxonomic mechanisms of the Guggenheim Museum New York in 1994, analyzing the conditions and limits of his cultural mediation. Paik drew a fine-grained picture of Japanese experimental art as a Korean who had studied in Tokyo during the 1950s and then re-visited in the 1960s. He employed discursive strategies directed towards rewriting art history in ways that take account of multiple agencies and cultural entanglements. She analyzes the institutional conflicts that arose between Paik and Guggenheim's Japanese survey show, *Scream against the sky*, to which he contributed an essay but declined to participate with his work. Her richly researched case study articulates the transcultural (counter-) potential of artists who work(ed) across borders, especially at moments when Western canonization was a double-edged sword.

The theme of American anthropophagy in travel literature, letters, book illustrations and early modern European images is explored by Maria Berbara. The image of the "Brazilian cannibal" became a visual topos, constructed from fragments of human bodies for consumption, cut with sickles, knives, or axes. In her text, Berbara reviews the ethnocentric categories linked to cannibalism with a view to "deterritorializing" the Tupiniquim "butcher's table". For this, she investigates examples of detailed reports on anthropophagy in other temporalities and spaces (such as in Mongolia and Java). His case study seeks to understand how the images of the slaughter table were joined by other contemporary issues "relating to the conversion process" such as the iconography of the desecration of the host.

Among the classification structures being revised by the "global turn" is the differentiation between the fine arts and the minor arts/applied arts. The hierarchical obstacles they impose are no longer sustainable when applied to certain Euro-American objects, and even less when oriented to

the arts of Japan. To reflect on the expansion of non-Eurocentric artistic genres, Madalena Hashimoto Cordaro and Michiko Okano depart from study of public or private Asian collections in Brazil, constituted by “interconnections resulting from displacements of people, objects, thoughts and the adhesions and connections produced”. Such collections do not shy away from the inclusive and extensive idea of Japanese art, as they present, side by side, artisanal artifacts, utilitarian or functional objects. As Cordaro and Okano explain, in the traditional Asian understanding, there is no “a split between the fine arts and the applied arts nor between the beauty and functionality of objects” but an essence that seeks to bring “life” and “art”.

Fernanda Pitta contributes with an article that examines the genesis of the notion of indigenous art in the late nineteenth century and its implications for the organization and construction of an idea of Brazilian art. The values, references, experiences, and modernist values that supported the notion of indigenous art within the national artistic production need to be revised. Based on Eduardo Prado's text – which summarized the arts produced by Brazilian indigenous peoples to ornamental objects, feather ornaments, ceramic arts – and the discursive operations of the last century, Pitta draws attention to the naturalization of a narrative that contributed to the invisibility of indigenous art in the collections of museums and artistic institutions in the country. In this context of restructuring the discipline, it is necessary to be attentive to the demands of agents and indigenous artists, to issues involving the visibility and musealization of the material culture of native peoples, as well as to the participation and insertion of indigenous artists in art circuits contemporary. Among the challenges to the discipline, the author launches a significant challenge: that of stimulating the review of studies by the indigenous people themselves, whether they are artists, creators, elders or researchers.

The case study by Daniel Vladimir Tapia Lira de Siqueira and Edson Leite also contributes to the review of disciplinary practices. The authors aim

to reflect on the artistic production created from a catastrophe (genocide, war, or terrorism; natural disaster: sanitary, migratory, or political crisis). For this, they turn to Chinese activist and artist Ai Weiwei and his works related to the earthquake that occurred in China (2008) that caused the death of approximately 5,000 children. With a denunciatory character, Ai Weiwei's work is also perceived as a “witness to the catastrophe”, insofar as they propose not to let the deaths be naturalized, forgotten, or erased from history by the Chinese authoritarian government. Siqueira and Leite point out the “testimony of the catastrophe” as a new category of investigation for the history of art, enabling the creation of new disciplinary routes and critical activities

Among the features that the “global turn” has taken is the inclusion of other materialities, Marco Túlio Lustosa de Alencar talks about the use of whole bodies or fragments of bodies of beings from the animal kingdom in the works of Brazilian and other international artists who, when exhibited in galleries, museums, or other cultural institutions, receive institutional certification and are recognized by the transnational art system. Despite this, works containing live or dead animals require further study by art historians. Thus, in addition to the so-discussed binaries such as the dichotomies of life/death, permanence/impermanence, it is necessary to understand how animals reified and turned into works of art bring other contributions “to our way of seeing”. According to Alencar, they raise “new positions in relation to canonical materials and materials of art”.

Closing the dossier, Flavia Galli Tatsch addresses the mobility of pre-modern objects and their effects on other temporalities and geographies. Her study focuses on the *Vierge Ouvrante* of the Joys of Mary from the Ivani and Jorge Yunes Collection – CIJY carved in ivory, in Asia, possibly in the 18th century, from a Portuguese or Spanish copy from the 13th century. The CIJY carving breaks with the taxonomies of “medieval” sculpture, traditionally divided into regional schools, by configuring itself as a witness of the appropriation of a theme and a “style” that has long been

abandoned and discredited.

The “global turn” as a method of approximation is still in its infancy among Brazilian historians. We hope that the set of articles published here contribute to this.

In August 2020, when the call for contributions to this dossier was published, the total number of deaths of Brazilians by Covid-19 reached 121,515 (G1, 31/08/2020). In December, the country was faced with a second wave of infections and deaths. The following month hopes for mass vaccinations created widespread anxiety. Many people thought that the resumption of projects would happen in the future. What a mistake! The delay in vaccination and the mutations made the Coronavirus even more transmissible and fatal. At the time of writing this text, on August 9, 2021, Brazil records more than 560,000 deaths and millions of mourners.

It was in a context of desolation, confinement, health and political crises, remote work, online classes, and no access to libraries that the authors of this dossier produced their articles. To all, thank you very much!

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