New Worlds: Frontiers, Inclusion, Utopias

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New Worlds: Frontiers, Inclusion, Utopias — Introduction

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In recent decades, art history has moved towards new theoretical settings impelled by a critical attitude towards its traditional concepts and premises and by the desire to become more global and more inclusive, embracing other art traditions in addition to the so-called "Western" ones. As Thomas DaCosta Kauffmann points out in his book *Towards a Geography of Art*, this process implied redesigning the "map" of art history and revising its geography in many ways[1]. In August 2015, when the colloquium that gave rise to this book was held in Rio de Janeiro as a joint initiative of the International Committee of Art Historians (CIHA) and the Brazilian Committee of Art History (CBHA), we hoped to contribute to the theoretical and methodological discussions of the field by focusing on the geopolitical displacements involved in the process of "expanding" the field of art history. Developing on the spatial metaphors subsumed in such a discourse, we proposed to understand the *New Worlds* of art history in terms of positions and relations within the various political maps in the field. Questions such as who has power and voice in art history today, who does the mapping, and how do images, ideas, people and things circulate across borders were to be foregrounded. Since then, the recent history of mass immigration and shutting of borders has turned many of the questions posed by the colloquium into pressing political issues, making the discussion held in this book even more urgent. If two years ago there was still a sense of optimism and a certain lightness in the perspective of building a truly global platform for art history with place and space for everyone, we now have to recognize the utopian dimension of this image and work harder to understand and deal with the complexity of our reality. Peter Krieger's essay in this volume rightly acknowledges the problem by confronting the discourses on "global art history," or on an art history "without boundaries," with the reality experienced by art historians in their everyday practice, in which they in fact need to cross linguistic, cultural, and territorial boundaries.

Maybe one of the results of the new political context in which we practice art history today is a growing distrust of any attempt to define the field in blunt global or universal terms. Joseph Imorde's essay offering a historical analysis of the "history of global art history" certainly furthers a better understanding of

1 Thomas DaCosta Kauffmann, *Towards a Geography of Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004

where we stand and what we want from our theories today. We believe that art historians have slowly realized that if they want to be integrated into a larger international community, methods and theories can only be multiple and diverse. We have come to realize that any attempt to develop one homogeneous art history has to be seen as imperialistic. Following this trend, the essays presented in this volume all propose reflections on how to practice an expanded art history, but in very different ways.

The opening essay by Ruth Phillips introduces a central challenge of art history today: how can we articulate an historical discourse that is informed by an indigenous understanding of land and culture? This question also resonates in Daniela Kern's article on the obliteration of indigenous art and discourse in Brazilian art historiography and reappears in Katve-Kaisa Kontturi's article, which focuses on the nexus to be established between art, collective identity, and activism. As the three authors show, these issues touch on the necessity of redirecting the way we frame our research and our discourses on art.

Other modes of critique of traditional methodological approaches can be found in this volume as well. One of them is Raphaèle Preisinger's comparative study of medieval Black Madonnas and Colonial Black Christs, which suggests an alternative reading for traditional discourses that rely on the idea of "influence." The racial tensions imbedded in the superposition of constructed space and living space that guides Jorun Poettering's analysis of the uses of fountains in the city of Rio de Janeiro is another important example of an innovative approach to the theme. Several other essays seek new art historical narratives that avoid the traditional geographical opposition of "center and periphery" to focus on other geographical concepts such as circulation, or the transcultural exchange of art and ideas. Pedro Luengo's interpretation of Southeast Asian architecture and Alfredo J. Morales's analysis of Tonalá Ceramics take on this approach, as well as Isabel Plante's essay on the connections between Paris and Buenos Aires in the '60s and '70s. Ana M. Franco's article on the relations between New York and Bogotá in the '50s and '60s, Daniel Montero's examination of diplomatic relations between the US and Mexico, and Michael Gnehm's analyses of Gottfried Semper's contribution to a competition for a Lyric theater in Rio de Janeiro in the 19th century also follow this tendency. New geographies and new

directions of transcultural interaction can also be accessed in Frederic Asher's analysis of "curiosity" as a central concept for approaching the exchanges between India and the Western world at the beginning of the modern era. Michael Asbury's essay, for his part, contributes to the theoretical debate on place and space by examining the instability of terms within the international field of conceptual art.

Steve Nelson's fine investigation of Ousmane Sambène's film *Black Girl* adds to the theme of new geographies by reflecting on the power of constructed personal geographies, which are nevertheless directly connected to political post-colonial histories. Coming back to the probing of the field of art history itself, Romuald Tchibozo gives us a historical narrative of the complex process of integrating the African continent into the discipline. A sharp critique of the traditional mapping of cultural and artistic developments in the case of the Americas is delivered by Valeria Piccoli, Peter John Brownlee, and Giorgiana Uhlyarik, the curators of the itinerant exhibition *Painting the Americas*, which proposes to explore the still under-researched connections within the continent.

After traveling through different times and spaces, often passing through South America, the reader can establish some central points but they are alternative and temporary, because in the end this volume does not circumscribe a static and totalizing image. On the contrary, the book concludes by demanding new unfoldings, other reflections, more action, a continuous mapping. The book closes with Claire Farago's essay "Who's History? Why? When? Who Benefits and Who Doesn't," which offers a broad overview of the main theoretical and methodological issues that are relevant to the field of art history today. Using the example of Ivory Oliphants, a category of object that resists traditional classifications, the author examines alternative approaches that can contribute to the development of a less Eurocentric and more inclusive art history. Her remarks echo many of the problems discussed by the other authors in this book. This clearly shows that we share many concerns and makes us feel that Claire Farago's call for intensified international collaboration at the end of her text, viewed as a strategy for the development of a more critical and inclusive art history, should stretch beyond the publication of this book.